

HISTORICAL CRITICISM AND THE EVANGELICAL

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Since the inception of historical criticism (hereafter HC) in the post-Enlightenment period of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, conservatives and evangelicals have wrestled with their relationship to this discipline. Due to its origins in rationalism and anti-supernaturalism, it has been a stormy relationship. In the nineteenth century, the Cambridge trio Lightfoot, Westcott and Hort opposed the liberal movements of rationalism and tendency criticism (F. C. Baur) with a level of scholarship more than equal to their opponents, and in Germany Theodor Zahn and Adolf Schlatter opposed the incursion of HC. In America scholars like Charles Hodge and Benjamin Warfield in theology and J. Gresham Machen and O. T. Allis in biblical studies fought valiantly for a high view of Scripture along with a critical awareness of issues. However, in none of these conservative scholars do we find a wholesale rejection of critical tools.

From the 1920s to the 1940s little interaction occurred as fundamentalism turned its back on dialogue with higher critics, believing that to interact was to be tainted by contact with the methods. It was then that wholesale rejection of critical methodology became standard in fundamentalist scholarship. However, in the late 1940s the rise of evangelicalism (including the birth of ETS!) renewed that debate, and scholars like George Ladd and Leon Morris once more began to champion a high view of Scripture within the halls of academia. Since then evangelicalism has continuously debated the extent to which evangelicals could participate in higher critical studies and still maintain a high view of the authority of the inerrant Scriptures.

I. THE RECENT DEBATE

Alan Johnson in his 1982 presidential address to ETS used an excellent analogy when he asked whether higher criticism was “Egyptian gold or pagan precipice,” quoting Augustine on the Christian use of pagan philosophy in his *On Christian Doctrine* (II, 40.60).

Just as the Egyptians had not only idols . . . so also they had vases and ornaments of gold and silver and clothing which the Israelites took with them when they fled. . . . In the same way all the teachings of the pagans contain not only simulated and superstitious imaginings . . . but also liberal disciplines more suited to the uses of truth. . . . When the Christian separates himself from

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their miserable society, he should take this treasure with him for the just use of teaching the gospel.¹

Johnson concluded that Augustine's point applied to the evangelical use of historical criticism. While extreme caution should be exercised, he called ETS "a Society where those who are involved in the refinement of critical methodologies under the magisterium of an inerrant scriptural authority can move us gently into a deeper appreciation of sacred Scripture and its full appropriation to our lives and to the mission of the Church in our age."²

Others, however, have rejected any possibility of evangelical involvement in HC. John Montgomery called such pursuits the death knell of evangelical orthodoxy.³ In fact, when questioned in a meeting of this society if he was not "throwing out the baby with the bath water" in his rejection of redaction criticism, Montgomery replied, "The difference is, you think there's a baby there, and I don't." This is indeed the question: "Is there a baby in the bath water of critical methodology?" Norm Geisler argued that the philosophical roots of HC were so pervasive to its methodology that to use them would de facto constitute an attack on inerrancy.⁴ Gerhard Maier began a lengthy debate in Germany by arguing that the historical-critical method does not elucidate Scripture but rather is contrary to the biblical concept of revelation and replaces inspiration with human reason, propositional truth with faith-encounter, and divine revelation with human experience.⁵ Eta Linnemann has continued the attack on German criticism by stating that the secular presuppositions of the radical critics have no place in a Christian approach to Scripture, and that the dangers so outweigh any so-called advantages that believing scholars can have nothing to do with those methods.⁶ Finally, Robert Thomas argued that redaction criticism by nature alters what has traditionally been considered historical, rejects harmonization, and is incompatible with grammatical-historical exegesis. Therefore, it can have no place in an evangelical methodology.⁷

In the ETS, the primary years of debate were 1975–1985, as article after article was written defending or attacking an evangelical use of such tools as form, redaction, or narrative criticism. I remember co-chairing the final forum on the issue with Robert Thomas in 1985. There it was decided to "agree to disagree" and to allow the society to explore further the possibility of a nuanced use of critical methodology. Since that time numerous books

¹ Alan F. Johnson, "The Historical-Critical Method: Egyptian Gold or Pagan Precipice?" *JETS* 26 (1983) 3.

² *Ibid.* 15.

³ John W. Montgomery, "The Fuzzification of Biblical Inerrancy," *Faith Founded on Fact: Essays in Evidential Apologetics* (Nashville: Nelson, 1978) 220–222. For a similar approach, see Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), and his *The Bible in the Balance* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979).

⁴ Norman L. Geisler, *Biblical Errancy: An Analysis of Its Philosophical Roots* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981).

⁵ Gerhard Maier, *The End of the Historical-Critical Method*, trans. E. W. Leverenz and R. F. Norden (St. Louis: Concordia, 1977; German ed. 1974).

⁶ Eta Linnemann, *Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology*, trans. R. W. Yarbrough (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990).

⁷ Robert L. Thomas, "The Hermeneutics of Evangelical Redaction Criticism," *JETS* 29 (1986) 447–459.

and articles have taken this approach, such as Black and Dockery's *New Testament Criticism and Interpretation*, containing a series of articles exploring both critical methods and issues in an evangelical framework. In the preface the editors affirm the divine inspiration and human authorship of Scripture and then state, "To deny that the Bible should be studied through the use of literary and critical methodologies is to treat the Bible as less than human, less than historical, and less than literature."⁸

However, a new series of attacks against the viability of higher critical methodologies has recently taken place. Such warnings are important and should not be ignored. First, Geisler's presidential address last November renewed the argument that pagan philosophies are inimical to an inerrant view of biblical authority and cannot be utilized.⁹ After discussing the philosophies that in the last 400 years have proved inimical to Christian truth (such as the naturalism of Spinoza, Hume and Bultmann or the agnosticism of Kant), he then argued once again that HC cannot be utilized by evangelicals without destroying the veracity of Scripture. Especially vociferous was the renewal of his long-standing attack against Murray Harris for supposedly denying the physical resurrection of the believer, charging that Harris has a monistic anthropology that replaces the physical with a spiritual resurrection body. Yet Harris has specifically stated in *Christianity Today* that he does not hold that belief. There he says that he believes in two modes of Jesus' resurrection body, the physical and the spiritual, and that the resurrection body is indeed fleshly.¹⁰ In spite of the many evangelicals who have examined his beliefs and affirmed that Harris does not deny a physical resurrection,¹¹ Geisler unfortunately renews his charges once more. In the preface to the issue that contained his presidential address of 1983, Louis Goldberg said,

⁸ David Alan Black and David S. Dockery, *New Testament Criticism and Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991) 14.

⁹ Norman L. Geisler, "Beware of Philosophy: A Warning to Biblical Scholars," *JETS* 42 (1999) 3–19.

¹⁰ "News: The Mother of All Muddles—Evangelical theologians clash over what kind of body Jesus Christ has following his resurrection," *CT* 34/7 (1993) 62–66. In it Harris says, "if I were starting over again, there are words that I would not use. One is the word *immaterial*, because it's so open to misunderstanding, and another would certainly be *essentially immaterial* . . ." (p. 63).

¹¹ In 1993, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School asked Millard Erickson, Roger Nicole, and Bruce Demarest to examine the views of Murray Harris on the resurrection and to determine the orthodoxy of his beliefs. On Feb. 9, 1993 they submitted their report, stating that while Dr. Harris' views were unusual in some respects, they were well within the bounds of orthodoxy. They found six aspects of his views: (1) The tomb of Jesus was empty, and the body was neither stolen nor annihilated. (2) Christ was physically raised from the dead in the same body in which he died, albeit with the properties of a spiritual body. (3) During his appearances, his spiritual body had a "dual modality," customarily invisible and nonfleshly but occasionally visible and fleshly. (4) Jesus' resurrection involved "resuscitation, transformation, and exaltation." (5) This transformation was not an "identity of physical particles with the pre-death body" but was "a transformed human nature and form." (6) The resurrection was "an historical event in the sense of a space-time occurrence," and the appearances involved "presentations of a real body to real witnesses." See also Stephen T. Davis, *Risen Indeed: Making Sense of the Resurrection* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 59n. J. I. Packer says in the CT article (previous footnote) that Harris' view fits "all the relevant texts comfortably" and is not new—scholars from Westcott to Ladd (and Tenney) have held a similar view.

Our society should be spiritually and intellectually mature enough to enable each of us to listen to one another in an atmosphere of respect, giving opposing viewpoints a fair hearing, and then make decisions that are honest before the Lord and intellectually compatible within the framework of evangelical scholarship. Strident propaganda on behalf of one position or another should never be the tactic to ascertain the truth that all of us seek.¹²

Geisler's address was another unfortunate example of the "strident propaganda" that too often characterizes our society in its quest for balance and truth. The cautions are salutary, but much of the argumentation and tone is not.

The book that Geisler appealed to in his article is the second and more serious challenge to evangelical involvement in HC, *The Jesus Crisis*, edited by Robert Thomas and David Farnell. The primary purpose of the book is to argue the absolute necessity of believing that the Gospel writers worked independently from one another. In their opinion, any view of literary dependence is the result of HC and will lead to the denial of the historical veracity of the Gospels. In defending this position, the book contains chapters not only on source criticism but also on form (FC), tradition (TC), and redaction (RC) criticism. When evangelicals use the tools of FC and TC, Farnell argues, they "operate from a similar presuppositional grid, resulting in the same type of dehistoricizing of Jesus' words and works as the anathematized Jesus Seminar."¹³ According to Farnell, FC demands a strict evolutionary approach to the development of the isolated units in the Gospel episodes, and evangelical methodology cannot escape the subtle implications of this a priori principle. It is a negative discipline that presupposes non-historicity in the synoptic accounts, and attempts to use it without the negative bias must finally fail.¹⁴ But we must realize the vast differences between evangelical FC and the methods of the Jesus Seminar: (1) The Seminar considers a saying guilty until proven innocent, exactly the opposite of evangelical approaches. (2) For them neither the canon nor theology can be used to harmonize texts, again contrary to evangelicals. (3) There is little room for the supernatural in the Seminar, while there are constant articles on the validity of miracles among evangelicals. (4) The criteria of authenticity play a decisive role for them, while evangelicals give it only a limited role at best (see below). (5) Radical skepticism is the name of the game for the Seminar, but evangelicals are optimistic about the historicity of the Gospels. This is merely a sample of the many differences, but it will suffice to prove how little validity there is to Farnell's claim.

Thomas similarly rejects RC because he believes that its roots in the negative results of source, form and tradition criticism are so invasive that it too is destructive of the historicity of the Gospel accounts. For him RC is entirely dependent on the two-source theory, namely Markan priority and the use of Q by Matthew and Luke. Theology replaces history as the evan-

¹² Louis Goldberg, "Guest Editorial," *JETS* 27 (1984) 2.

¹³ David Farnell, "Form Criticism and Tradition Criticism," in *The Jesus Crisis: The Inroads of Historical Criticism into Evangelical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998) 207.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 207–220.

gelist both shape their tradition and create new details in line with their theological emphases. Thus the liabilities outweigh the benefits, for the very integrity and truthfulness of the sacred evangelists are impugned as the historicity of their accounts is rejected.¹⁵ Therefore evangelicals using these methods ultimately have to move from a view that the evangelists selected and highlighted Jesus' teaching to a view that they created new sayings, almost without realizing the implications of what they are doing. Harmonization is relegated to secondary status, and one never knows if it is Jesus or the early church speaking in the Logia Jesu.¹⁶

These are serious charges, and the warning must be taken seriously. However, are the claims of Geisler and *The Jesus Crisis* correct? Does the use of the tools of source, form or redaction criticism automatically involve the denigration of the historical component in the Gospels? I will argue that it does not and that those who have used such tools under the aegis of an inerrant Scripture (e.g. Blomberg, Bock, Carson or Stein) have just as high a view of the historicity of the Gospels as do our critics. Again, the cautions are salutary, but much of the argumentation and conclusions are not. Let us consider the major issues.

II. THE TWO-SOURCE THEORY

Historically, views regarding the relationship between the synoptic Gospels have not always centered upon literary issues. For 1700 years the discussion was on the order of the Gospels and their historical reliability. The "Augustinian hypothesis" predominated, that Matthew wrote first, followed in order by Mark, Luke and John. It must also be stated that there were never any probing studies of the issue. Even Augustine's statement (*Harmony of the Gospels* 1.2.3, 4) was more a summary of prevalent opinion than an analysis of the data. He was more interested in harmonizing discrepancies than in developing a literary theory. The first attempt at a literary harmony was Tatian's *Diatessaron* (c. AD 150), but he simply wove the four together. Eusebius of Caesarea (265–339) in his "Canons" listed material common to all four, that common to three, and so on. But he never went further. However, in the latter part of the eighteenth century two views challenged the status quo: the "Griesbach hypothesis" still held Matthean priority but argued that Luke was literarily dependent on him and that Mark used both Matthew and Luke as sources. Also developing at this time was a theory of Markan priority, later expanded into the "Oxford hypothesis" by William Sanday (1909) and B. H. Streeter (1924). This view asserted that Matthew and Luke used both Mark and Q, a compilation of Jesus' sayings common to Matthew and Luke but not found in Mark.

Three primary theories of Gospel relationships have developed, one centering on Markan priority, one on Matthean priority, and one on the independence of the Gospels from one another. Recently Eta Linnemann¹⁷ as well

¹⁵ Robert Thomas, "Redaction Criticism," in *The Jesus Crisis* 253–56.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 257–261.

¹⁷ Eta Linnemann, *Is There a Synoptic Problem?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992).

as Edgar and Thomas in *The Jesus Crisis*¹⁸ have written strong defenses of the independence theory, a view that is not even discussed in Stein's *Synoptic Problem* (1987) and McKnight's *Interpreting the Synoptic Gospels* (1988). They argue that the number of occasions that Matthew and Luke agree against Mark or that Matthew and Mark agree against Luke or that Mark and Luke agree against Matthew militates against any theory of literary dependence. As Thomas concludes, these demonstrate "a random combination of agreements and disagreements that are explainable only through an independent use by each writer of tradition based on personal memories of eyewitnesses."¹⁹ The absence of evidence for Q and the difficulties of either Markan or Matthean priority, it is argued, make it most likely that the writers consulted each other along with other traditions (Luke 1:1–4) but unlikely that they used or copied each other's Gospels.

This theory is viable, but unfortunately both Linnemann and *The Jesus Crisis* go one step too far in arguing for their position. They allege that anyone accepting literary dependence introduces a factor that affects the historicity of the accounts. If Matthew or Luke editorially changed Mark, then the chronology or the details of a story or the sayings of Jesus themselves were altered. Thus the historical veracity of the synoptic accounts is impugned. For instance, if the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7 or the mission discourse in Matthew 10 are compiled from several sayings of Jesus, then the historical framework of the passages (5:1–2 and 7:28; 10:5a and 11:1) that indicate Jesus gave the sermons on a single occasion must be wrong.²⁰

However, this is not the case. The rabbis frequently engaged in "pearl stringing," that is, a topical collection of sayings strung together into a single whole. Jesus did give those messages, but under the leading of the Holy Spirit Matthew or Luke were also free to attach other sayings on the same topic. This does not impugn the historicity of the sayings. The whole issue of chronology and organization into the Gospels is critical here (see the next section). Moreover, if Matthew and Luke were to use Mark and alter in some fashion Mark's wording, they were not "creating" new material that Jesus had not said. Rather, they were bringing in other nuances that Jesus had stated but Mark had not included. All three versions of a saying are historically accurate and go back to Jesus' original message; each simply highlights a different aspect of the original saying. This is true whether one holds to independence or literary dependence. Differences remain differences and need explanation whether they originated via redaction or independence. Relative to the question of the exact nature of the historical event and historicity, differences still need to be assessed and evaluated. Independence does not remove them or explain them on its own. If one were to say that Matthew's Sermon on the Mount and Luke's Sermon on the Plain went back to the same message of Jesus (which many do since the "level place" in

¹⁸ Thomas and Farnell, *Jesus Crisis* 132–153, 233–246.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 245.

²⁰ Thomas, *Jesus Crisis* 17–27.

Luke 6:17 means a “plateau” in a mountainous area²¹ and there are striking similarities between the two sermons), then how do we reconcile Matthew’s “Blessed are the poor in spirit” and Luke’s “Blessed are the poor”? Must one be more historical than the other on the basis of redaction critical criteria? Not on the basis of an evangelical use of the tools (see below). Matthew is emphasizing the spiritual side and Luke the economic side of the same original saying. In other words, both are equally historical.

Moreover, I am open to the independence view but am unconvinced because of the way the Gospels relate to one another. The data tends to favor not just literary interdependence but Markan priority. First, one must explain the remarkable verbal similarities, as in Jesus’ reply to the paralytic in Mark 2:10–11 = Matt 9:6 = Luke 5:24. Frequently these parallels exist especially between Mark and Matthew and between Mark and Luke but rarely between Matthew and Luke. It could be argued that *ipsissima verba* accounts for the similarities, but that would fail to explain other sayings and stories where the wording is remarkably different, as in the first beatitude discussed above or the fact that agreements also touch on remarks about setting or narrative detail. I ask my students to estimate the likelihood of any two sets of their class notes having exactly the same wording—virtually nil. Consider another example: Suppose four people report on a German lecture and publish virtually identical translations, both in terms of what was said and how the setting and scene are described. If that were to happen, one would assume some type of literary dependence between the reports. Extensive verbal similarity points to a literary connection.

At the same time, when one compares the order of events, Matthew and Luke tend to follow Mark generally but rarely one another. Mark seems to be the control. Third, Mark is shorter and more “primitive” in its wording, while Matthew and Luke use 90% of Mark and seem to smooth it out. It is hard to see why Mark would make Matthew or Luke more awkward in his wording, but easy to see why they would smooth out Mark’s Greek and wording.²² Moreover, if the Gospels were independent of one another and simply using similar traditions, how would one account for the occasional agreement in side comments, like Mark 13:14 = Matt 24:15, “Let the reader understand,” or Mark 5:8 = Luke 8:29, which explain the demon’s plea that Jesus not torment them by adding, “For he had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man”? It is unlikely that such parenthetical comments would have come independently. In short, the evidence does not prove a literary relationship and Markan priority, but it makes it likely. The theory of independence is possible but not mandated by the data. In short, the evidence does not prove a literary relationship or Markan priority, but it does make it more likely than independence.

²¹ See D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Volume 8 (ed. F. E. Gaebelin; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 125–126; and Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50* (BECNT 3A; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994) 931–944, for this view.

²² See D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 33–34.

The same is true of the hypothetical document Q. While there is no absolute proof of its existence, and while it debated whether it is an actual document, an oral tradition, or a mixture of oral and written material (my preference), there is still strong evidence for its existence. First, one must account for the 250 (some argue for as many as 325) verses, mainly Logia Jesu, that are common to Matthew and Luke but not found in Mark or John. It is certainly possible that this many parallel sayings found their way independently into Matthew and Luke, but we must remember that John said, "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written" (21:25). There were undoubtedly thousands of sayings not included in the Gospels. What is the likelihood that two Gospels written independently would contain so many of the same sayings? Moreover, as stated above, the verbal agreement between some of these sayings (e.g., Matt 4:1–11 par. Luke 4:1–13; Matt 23:37–39 par. Luke 13:34–45) makes it likely that there was some type of interdependence. At the same time, the considerable differences in wording in many other sayings (e.g., the beatitudes or the Lord's prayer) and the different contexts in which Matthew and Luke have placed the material makes it unlikely that Matthew or Luke were using each other. In conclusion, a source now called Q remains the best explanation of this material.²³

III. HARMONIZATION

In several places in the *Jesus Crisis* book, the authors make the charge that HC makes it impossible for evangelicals to harmonize conflicting passages. For instance, Thomas and Farnell say, "Historical criticism with its assumption of literary interdependence has little room for harmonizing apparent discrepancies in parallel accounts of the Synoptic Gospels."²⁴ Those who practice RC are particularly singled out. Thomas says, "Evangelical RC minimizes and in some cases absolutely denies the possibility of harmonizing. . . ."²⁵ On one issue they are correct, the possibility of reconstructing a chronological life of Christ. He correctly quotes me saying, "we can never completely harmonize the Synoptics and John—for instance, to attain a so-called chronological 'footsteps of Jesus.'"²⁶ However, I was hardly denying the value of harmonizing events but rather was saying simply that no final complete chronological picture can be attained (see the next section). In fact, in a recent work I have developed a chronological harmonization of the empty tomb and appearance narratives to demonstrate the historicity of the Gospel

²³ For succinct summaries, see Stein, "Source Criticism," and Graham Stanton, "Q," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* 644–650, 790–791; Scot McKnight, *Interpreting the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988) 38–40; and Carson, Moo and Morris, *Introduction to the New Testament* 34–36.

²⁴ Thomas and Farnell, *Jesus Crisis* 66. They add, "evangelicals who practice HC have shown strong rejection of traditional methods of harmonization practiced by evangelicalism."

²⁵ *Ibid.* 258.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 259, from my "Round Four—The Redaction Debate Continues," *JETS* 28 (1985) 409.

accounts.²⁷ Furthermore, the primary attempts to harmonize the resurrection accounts have come from evangelicals who use HC;²⁸ and the best recent article on harmonizing comes from the redaction critic Craig Blomberg, who concludes, “the tools of higher criticism not only do not have to be viewed as inherently destructive but can, in fact, join hands with traditional harmonization in the service of a high view of Scripture.”²⁹ A good example of evangelical harmonizing is the vast amount he does in his monumental *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*,³⁰ which summarized the seven-volume *Gospel Perspectives* project of Tyndale Fellowship in England. All in the latter series were HC scholars who sought to verify the historical reliability of the Gospel accounts. In short, evangelical critics are not only open to harmonizing but exemplify it constantly.

As an example, let us consider the famous discrepancy from Mark 10:17–18 (= Luke 18:18–19)/Matt 19:16–17.

Mark 10:17–18

“A man ran up . . . and began asking him, ‘Good teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good. No one is good except God alone.’”

Matt 19:16–17

“One came to him and said, ‘Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?’ And he said to him, ‘Why are you asking me about what is good? There is only one who is good. . . .’”

In Matthew it is not Jesus’ goodness that is at stake but good deeds. It is commonly stated by RCs that Matthew altered Mark to avoid a misunderstanding that Jesus was not truly divine. This is probably not completely correct, but neither is the harmonization theory adopted by Kelly Osborne in *The Jesus Crisis*, in which she conflates the two into one, “Teacher, good teacher, by doing what will I inherit eternal life? I mean, what should I do in order to inherit eternal life?”³¹ Such a repetitive conflation is unnecessary. It is simpler to take both versions as a paraphrase of the original scene. When the man in Mark asked “what must I do,” Matthew correctly saw this as a question about good works; and there could well be double meaning behind *Τί με λέγεις ἀγαθόν*; (literally, “Why are you talking about

²⁷ Grant R. Osborne, *Three Crucial Questions about the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996) 39–41.

²⁸ George Ladd, *I Believe in the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 91–93; John Wenham, *The Easter Enigma: Are the Resurrection Accounts in Conflict* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984); Murray Harris, *From Grave to Glory: Resurrection in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990) 157–163.

²⁹ Craig L. Blomberg, “The Legitimacy and Limits of Harmonization,” *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 174.

³⁰ Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1987).

³¹ Kelly Osborne, “Impact of Historical Criticism on Gospel Interpretation: A Test Case,” in *The Jesus Crisis* 297.

the good”) which would allow both Mark’s and Matthew’s translations.³² In other words, RC provides a more plausible historical harmonization.

IV. CHRONOLOGY AND ORDER OF EVENTS

None of the Gospel writers are interested in a strictly chronological narration of the life of Jesus. This is obvious first by comparing the Synoptics with John. In John Jesus makes several trips to Jerusalem during his ministry, and there are three passovers (2:13; 6:4; 11:55 = 12:1), indicating at least a two-year ministry. In the Synoptics Jesus only goes to Jerusalem at the end of his ministry and seems to have a one-year ministry. Moreover, even the Synoptics differ widely at times on the order of events in Jesus’ ministry. There is no evidence anywhere of a week-by-week or month-by-month itinerary of Jesus’ life. This is hardly a new realization. Augustine himself realized that there was no actual temporal chronicle of Jesus’ movements in the Gospels but often a topical organization. However, this does not mean that there is no chronology in the Gospels.

The basic principle is that one should assume chronology only when the text explicitly makes such a connection, as in the “single day’s ministry” of Jesus in Capernaum of Mark 1:21–34, followed by the event the next morning in 1:35–38. While a topical organization is usually a problem in modern biography, that method was often used in the ancient world and was hardly problematic. Therefore when Matthew places the healing of the leper before the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law (8:1–4, 14) unlike Mark (1:29–31, 40–45) and then follows these healings almost immediately with the calming of the storm and the healing of the Gadarene demoniacs (8:23–34) while Mark places them much later (4:35–5:20), such a fact does not produce a historical discrepancy once one realizes the topical organization of both Matthew and Mark.³³ In fact, RC proves a great help by explaining the theological reasons for each one’s organization. A famous example occurs in the reversal of the second and third temptations in Matthew (4:5–10) and Luke (4:5–12). This is only a discrepancy if one demands strict chronological order. Instead, it is likely that Matthew ends with Jesus on a mountain because of the centrality of mountain scenes in his Gospel, while Luke ends with Jesus taken to the top of the pinnacle of the temple due to the prominence of the temple in his two-volume work. Arguments can be made in either direction regarding which version has the “correct” order. In terms of the Spirit’s inspiration, both are correct.

V. *IPSISSIMA VERBA* AND *IPSISSIMA VOX*

Paul Feinberg in his well-known article on “The Meaning of Inerrancy” says,

³² See Blomberg, “Harmonization” 158–159.

³³ See J. Julius Scott Jr., “The Synoptic Gospels,” in *Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume I: Introductory Articles* (ed. F. E. Gaebelin; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979) 507–510.

*Inerrancy does not demand that the Logia Jesu (the sayings of Jesus) contain the ipsissima verba (the exact words of Jesus, only the ipsissima vox (the exact voice)). . . . When a New Testament writer cites the sayings of Jesus, it need not be the case that Jesus said those exact words. Undoubtedly, the exact words of Jesus are to be found in the New Testament, but they need not be in every instance. For one thing, many of the sayings were spoken by our Lord in Aramaic, and thus had to be translated into Greek. . . . Thus, it is impossible for us to know which are direct quotes, which are indirect discourse, and which are free renderings.*³⁴

Thomas in *The Jesus Crisis* says “The general impact of (evangelical HC) has been on the side of assuming the gospel writers never reported . . . the *ipsissima verba* . . . of the Lord.”³⁵ He then quotes Stein and Bock to the effect that the evangelists regularly paraphrased Jesus’ teaching and had to do so partly because Jesus spoke in Aramaic and they had to translate it into Greek. Thomas misunderstands them both in two ways. First, neither states that there are no “exact words” of Jesus in the Gospels, only that summaries and paraphrases predominate. Let me give an illustration. We would think that when an evangelist gives the Aramaic, it must be *ipsissima verba*. While that is usually the case, the cry of dereliction in Matt 27:46 is “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani” (Hebrew) while in Mark 15:34 it is “Eloi, Eloi . . .” (Aramaic). It is not important here to debate which one might reflect the original, for both are inspired renderings. However, we must note that even here the evangelists did not stick to the “exact words” of Jesus. Second, Thomas has them saying that Jesus *never* spoke Greek, while both Bock and Stein recognize Jesus’ trilingual nature (speaking Aramaic [his native tongue], Hebrew [the religious language], and Greek [spoken often in Galilee]). However, very few scholars would affirm that Jesus usually spoke Greek, and that seems to be Thomas’s point (p. 368). There is a big difference between saying Jesus in some cases spoke Greek and in stating that Jesus did so “most of the time” (p. 369). Moreover, to say “Jesus spoke Greek most of the time” will not work to explain the differences, because if there was a translation from Aramaic at any time, then we do not have Jesus’ “very words” but a translation of them. In Thomas’s view, the differences between sayings in the various Gospels is due to addition or omission of *ipsissima verba* rather than to paraphrase. Certainly that is the case on occasion, but to demand that every discrepancy must be harmonized this way is virtually impossible to uphold, for too many instances do not fit such an explanation.

Moreover, to say that virtually all the sayings in the Gospels are *ipsissima verba* is a dangerous overstatement, for inerrancy itself is at stake. Thomas demands more precision from the Gospel accounts than they can give. Such precision is virtually impossible to demonstrate. Let me give a couple examples (note also the discussion of Jesus’ dialogue with the rich

³⁴ Paul Feinberg, “The Meaning of Inerrancy” in *Inerrancy* (ed N. L. Geisler; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979) 270 (italics in the original).

³⁵ Thomas, *Jesus Crisis* 367.

young ruler above).³⁶ The centurion's cry in Matt 27:54 and Mark 15:39 is "Surely this man was the Son of God," while in Luke 23:47 it is "Surely this was a righteous man." While one could argue that the centurion said both, such would have been redundant, for "righteous person" was the meaning of "a son of God" for a Roman. For Luke to paraphrase the centurion's meaning in light of his emphasis on Jesus as the innocent righteous sufferer in his crucifixion narrative would make a great deal more sense.³⁷ Also, in Matt 7:11 Jesus says a loving Father will give "good things to those who ask him," while in Luke 11:13 the Father gives "the Holy Spirit to those who ask him." The sayings are virtually identical except for "good things"/"Holy Spirit." It is again unlikely and unnecessary to argue that Jesus said both and much better to say that Luke has specified one of the most important of the "good things" in light of his emphasis on the Holy Spirit in his book.³⁸ Both are accurate reflections of the *ipsissima vox* of Jesus.

VI. FORM AND TRADITION CRITICISM

Farnell argues that FC is philosophically driven and is not a methodology but an ideology. Therefore, to utilize its tools is to be controlled by its presuppositions and invariably to damage the historical credibility of the Gospel accounts.³⁹ Certainly it is true that the movement originated in historical skepticism about the trustworthiness of the stories and an evolutionary view of the development of the stories through the so-called "oral period" of the church. German FC typically assumes that few of the sayings or stories go back to the historical Jesus and that most were the products of the kerygmatic needs of the church.⁴⁰ But this was by no means the case for all practitioners. British form critics like Vincent Taylor were far more cautious and rejected the radical premises and conclusions of many German scholars. It was noted that the period for oral transmission was much shorter than supposed, with both Q and Mark stemming from the 50s to 60s AD. Therefore eyewitnesses would have refuted radical creation of stories and sayings. The Scandinavian hypothesis of Riesenfeld and Gerhardsson argued that the memorization techniques of rabbinic instruction would have been used by Jesus and his disciples, and that therefore the sayings were much closer

³⁶ For an excellent list and discussion of examples of paraphrase in the Gospels, see Darrell Bock, "The Words of Jesus in the Gospels: Live, Jive, or Memorex," in *Jesus under Fire* (ed. M. J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 77–80; and Blomberg, *Historical Reliability* 117–127.

³⁷ See Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Luke* (TNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 330; and my "Redactional Trajectories in the Crucifixion Narratives," *EQ* 51 (1979) 89.

³⁸ The link would be the likely meaning of "good things" in Matthew as "spiritual gifts" and the connection of this with the Holy Spirit. See Carson, "Matthew" 187; and I. H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 469–470.

³⁹ Farnell, "Form Criticism and Tradition Criticism" in *Jesus Crisis* 185–186.

⁴⁰ Bultmann believed that only 5 or 6 sayings were historical, Schmidt that only a few went back to the original event. Dibelius was the most conservative, believing that as many as half reflected the original setting.

to the originating event than had heretofore been thought.⁴¹ In short, not all form critics held the skeptical outlook advocated by Bultmann, and evangelical form critics from the start rejected using the tool to discern historical development. Rather, they advocated form criticism as a literary tool for studying the kinds of sayings and stories in the Gospels. Donald Guthrie says that “form criticism began as a strictly literary discipline” and adds that “scholars who approach the literary forms from different points of view will evaluate them differently.”⁴² He concludes, “There is no reason why a true literary criticism cannot coexist with a high view of Scripture.”⁴³

An evangelical will use FC as a literary device to enhance an understanding of the text. It is certainly true that Bultmann and some of his colleagues assumed non-historicity when they identified forms like “legends,” “myths” and “tales,” all of which were assumed to be later creations of the church. There was also a radical skepticism at work when they discussed “miracle” stories” as based on Graeco-Roman myths. But this is not a necessary presupposition. The radical skepticism can be rejected, and then the literary value of the discipline comes to the fore. Carson, Moo and Morris state it well.⁴⁴

As a literary discipline, form criticism entails no a priori judgment about the historicity of the material that it analyzes. Moreover, many of the assumptions on which form criticism is based appear to be valid: there was indeed a period of mainly oral transmission of the gospel material; much of it was probably in small units; there probably was a tendency for this material to take on certain standard forms; and the early church has undoubtedly influenced the way in which this material was handed down. Defined narrowly in this way, there is undoubtedly a place for form criticism in the study of the Gospels.

There are many forms that are very helpful for elucidating the text. To know that in a paradigm or pronouncement story the narrative leads to a concluding statement at the end helps the interpreter better to see the flow of thought. Also, the study of creeds and hymns in the epistles has been extremely useful when interpreting passages like Rom 1:3–4, 10:9–10; Col 1:15–20; 1 Tim 3:16 or Heb 1:3–4. A good example might be the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19–31. Many have argued that it is a historical story because it names a character (no other parable does so) and is neither called a parable nor begins with the formula “The kingdom is like.” However, a form-critical analysis shows that it contains the characteristics of a parable (earthiness, brief plot, comparison of life situation to kingdom

⁴¹ See Harold Riesenfeld, *The Gospel Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970); Peter Davids, “The Gospels and Jewish Traditions: Twenty Years after Gerhardsson,” in *Gospel Perspectives: Studies of History and Tradition in the Four Gospels*, Vol. 1 (ed. R. T. France and David Wenham; Sheffield: JSOT, 1980) 75–99; and the excellent work by Rainer Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1981).

⁴² Donald Guthrie, “The Historical and Literary Criticism of the New Testament,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume I: Introductory Articles* (ed. F. E. Gaebelein; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979) 447–448.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 455.

⁴⁴ Carson, Moo and Morris, *Introduction to the New Testament* 23–24.

realities), and it begins with the same formula as the parable of the shrewd manager in 16:1, "There was a rich man who. . ." Thus FC used for literary purposes has great value.

The same is true of TC, though to a lesser extent. The criteria were indeed negative, based on radical skepticism, and assumed the non-historicity of much of the Gospels. However, they do demonstrate an irreducible minimum that even the most radical critic must accept. While that certainly has minimal value, it still has a place as a basis for dialogue with higher critics or with those who are considering the claims but have not yet decided where they stand.⁴⁵ Contrary to some, the term "tradition" does not mean a rejection of historicity but rather a study of sources for those who accept a high view of Scripture. Peter Davids provides four reasons for accepting a much more reliable process of tradition: (1) the post-Easter church was deeply interested in Jesus' teaching and deeds; (2) Jesus was seen as a teacher, and so his followers would have learned and passed on his teachings; (3) Jesus' teaching was not only memorized but written down while he was still alive; (4) there were ready models within Judaism for the accurate transmission of tradition.⁴⁶ In other words, a high view of Scripture turns TC into a positive tool for affirming history rather than denying it.

Let me use an example for which I was criticized both by Geisler and Farnell.⁴⁷ In one of my early articles on the Great Commission, I said that "Matthew expanded an original monadic formula" in 28:19, "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."⁴⁸ It was widely believed then and since that I believed Matthew had created the saying, but I did not. Later in that article I said that Matthew had done so "in order to interpret the true meaning of Jesus' message for his own day. . . . However, Matthew has faithfully reproduced the intent and meaning of what Jesus said."⁴⁹ In a later article I clarified this further by saying that Matthew had not created this but summarized a much longer speech and "elucidated the trinitarian background behind the entire speech."⁵⁰ In terms of TC, a saying is not unhistorical unless the author has *created* it, that is, created it *ex nihilo*. As stated above, a paraphrase of Jesus' saying is *ipsissima vox* and just as historically viable as *ipsissima verba*.

One of Thomas' most unfortunate charges is that evangelicals who use HC engage "in the same type of dehistoricizing activity as the Jesus Seminar

⁴⁵ See R. T. France, "The Authenticity of the Sayings of Jesus," in *History, Criticism, and Faith* (ed. Colin Brown; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1977); Grant R. Osborne, "The Evangelical and Traditions-geschichte," *JETS* 21 (1978) 117-130; and Robert Stein, "The Criteria for Authenticity," in *Gospel Perspectives I* (ed. R. T. France and David Wenham; Sheffield: JSOT, 1980) 225-263.

⁴⁶ Peter H. Davids, "Tradition Criticism," in *Dictionary of Jesus and His Gospels* (ed. J. B. Green and S. McKnight; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992) 833.

⁴⁷ Geisler, "Beware of Philosophy" 18; Farnell, "Tradition Criticism" 220.

⁴⁸ Grant R. Osborne, "Redaction Criticism and the Great Commission: A Case Study toward a Biblical Understanding of Inerrancy," *JETS* 19 (1976) 80.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 85.

⁵⁰ Grant R. Osborne, "The Evangelical and Redaction Criticism: Critique and Methodology," *JETS* 22 (1979) 311.

people with whom they differ”⁵¹ (also see the discussion of this above). He then predicts that such evangelicals would agree that Matthew created the Sermon on the Mount; Jesus never gave the exception clause of Matt 5:32, 19:9; the magi of Matthew 2 are fictional; and that Jesus only uttered three or four of the beatitudes. It is true that such things have been stated by individuals (though not the first one!) from time to time, and the danger of dehistoricizing exists. But such conclusions are rare, and most of the evangelicals he charges with this (e.g. Craig Blomberg, Darrell Bock, D. A. Carson, Moises Silva, Robert Stein, to name a few) have written more extensively than Thomas has defending historicity and inerrancy even on many of these very points. It is a dangerous generalization to take a few extremes and label an entire movement with the same brush. It is also dangerous to read every use of the terms “tradition” or “redaction” as meaning “non-history.” Those who use such terms simply do not mean that.

VII. REDACTION CRITICISM

It is clear that the primary problem with RC, as far as Thomas is concerned, is the two-source theory, for he devotes thirteen pages to it (pp. 233–245) even though an entire chapter had been written on it earlier! However, while most redaction critics accept the priority of Mark and Q, it is not essential to the discipline.⁵² RC studies the way the evangelists used their sources, and it can be done even in Mark by comparing it with Matthew and Luke to ascertain Mark’s distinctive emphases.⁵³ For instance, in the walking on the water episode (Mark 6:45–52), Mark ends his narration with the radical failure of the disciples, saying “their hearts were hardened” (v. 52), while Matthew ends on a note of worship and spiritual insight, saying, “Then those who were in the boat worshipped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God’” (14:33). The difference is that Matthew includes the episode of Peter walking on the water, and this allows him to note how they move from defeat to insight. Those who hold Markan priority would center on Matthew’s changes but still note the possibility that Mark deliberately omitted the story about Peter in order to center on the disciples’ failure. Those who hold to the independence of the Gospels could still do RC by looking at the differences and the distinctive theological emphases in both books. Both Mark and Matthew would have redacted their tradition differently. It is wrong to limit RC to those holding the two-source theory.

⁵¹ Thomas, “The Jesus Crisis: What Is It?” *Jesus Crisis* 14.

⁵² William Farmer and others who hold to Matthean priority also embrace RC. In fact, they have developed their own synopsis to enable them to do redaction critical studies: B. Orchard, *A Synopsis of the Four Gospels in Greek: Arranged According to the Two-Gospel Hypothesis* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1983).

⁵³ Certainly this is not as precise as studying the way Matthew or Luke used Mark, since on the basis of Markan priority one cannot know whether or not Mark was aware of M and L material not found in his gospel. However, such an approach still highlights Mark’s distinctive material.

Thomas believes that anyone using RC must accept the basic premises of the discipline:⁵⁴ (1) The gospel writers are theologians not historians; (2) the gospel events stem from “the fact of faith” in the early church rather than the actual historical events; (3) the gospels are the construction of the writers and are not sources for reconstructing the life of Jesus; (4) the authors added embellishments to those of the early church in altering the sayings and stories; (5) and “unregulated subjectivism” leads critics to read their own meanings into the gospel stories; (6) their criteria for detecting authentic material is biased toward non-historicity. Therefore, when evangelical RCs talk of the writers “selecting” certain details, they often replace historical interests with theological ones. When they talk of “arranging” the material, they turn even passages like the Sermon on the Mount into topical contrivances. When they talk of “modifications,” they often mean that the community of the author’s day controls the material rather than the original historical event. When they talk of “creativity,” they mean the evangelist has added things Jesus never said.⁵⁵

It is true that some evangelical RCs go too far at times, but it is not true that the discipline demands that they do so. The writers in *The Jesus Crisis* assume that when evangelical RCs use the term “redaction,” they mean non-historical material. This is not true. Contrary to this, Darrell Bock says,

Efforts to argue that Luke is exclusively either a theologian or a historian, with many opting to give history a lesser place, underplay the evidence in sources that show that Luke is careful with his material. . . . This point, however, does not mean that Luke cannot rearrange material for emphasis, summarize events in his own language, or bring out his own emphasis as drawn from the tradition. . . . He writes as a theologian and pastor, but as one whose direction is marked out by the history that preceded him.⁵⁶

“Redaction” to an evangelical RC means that the writer selected from his sources and from his memory those details that he wished to highlight. Every saying and every story came from the historical event and from what Jesus originally said. But the evangelist was free to expand, omit or paraphrase on the basis of what Jesus had originally said and done. For instance, Thomas criticizes the lack of harmonizing in my own book on the resurrection narratives. He first says that I strive “to separate what is redactional from what is historical” and then laments my refusal to harmonize the time notes, the names of the women and the postresurrection appearances, stating that I combine “actual events with redactional additions and changes by the author.”⁵⁷ Nothing could be further from the truth. That was my doctoral dissertation, and I entitled it “History and Tradition in the Resurrection Narratives.” I was actually arguing that all the redactional changes were historical and that the authors under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit

⁵⁴ Thomas, “Redaction Criticism,” *Jesus Crisis* 253–257.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 257–258.

⁵⁶ Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50* 13–14.

⁵⁷ Thomas, “Impact of Historical Criticism on Theology and Apologetics,” *Jesus Crisis* 360–361.

were selecting different details from the original historical event (see the discussion of “harmonization” above). In other words, when RC is employed with a high view of the authority of Scripture, it becomes a friend of apologetics rather than a foe.⁵⁸ It demonstrates that both “Blessed are the poor in spirit” and “Blessed are the poor” are historically accurate and go back to Jesus’ original teaching, which contained both emphases. In other words, it is inherently harmonistic rather than against harmonizing.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Evangelicals need continuous reminders regarding the dangers of critical tools, and we must police ourselves on these issues. Geisler and the *Jesus Crisis* book have done us a service in challenging us once more regarding potential excesses in which the tool controls the text rather than the text the tool. At the same time, we also need to follow Paul’s exhortation in 2 Tim 2:24 regarding discipline in the church, “And the Lord’s servant must . . . be kind to everyone. . . . Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance. . . .” In both Geisler and *The Jesus Crisis*, the tone is too harsh and grating, the positions too extreme. Carl F. H. Henry says, “What is objectionable is not the historical-critical method, but rather the alien presuppositions to which neo-protestant scholars subject it.”⁵⁹ When it is “freed from the arbitrary assumptions of critics,” it becomes “highly serviceable as a disciplined investigative approach to past historical events.”⁶⁰ The article by Geisler and the *Jesus Crisis* book provide necessary cautions regarding an evangelical misuse of HC but unfortunately go too far in their complete rejection of critical tools and their imputation of rationalist tendencies to evangelical scholars not guilty of them.

The most unfortunate aspect of both Geisler’s article and the *Jesus Crisis* book is the extravagant charges they make against fellow evangelical inerrantists. In war all too often casualties are due to “friendly fire” from one’s own side. This is the case here. Let me note three examples of such an egregious approach: (1) Farnell says that evangelical HCs “dance on the edge of hermeneutical and theological disaster” and demands that everyone “categorically reject historical-critical methods” and embrace “the grammatical-historical approach.”⁶¹ All evangelical HCs already embrace that method. (2) Hutchison says that “a warning of its dangers needs to be sounded to all those whom God has called to pulpit ministry.”⁶² It is clear that those in this

⁵⁸ An excellent example is Eckhard J. Schnabel’s study of the silence of Jesus in the trial accounts in “The Silence of Jesus: The Galilean Rabbi Who Was More Than a Prophet,” *Authenticating the Words of Jesus* (ed. B. D. Chilton and C. A. Evans; Leiden: Brill, 1999) 203–257. Using the tools of TC and RC, he not only affirms the historicity of the scenes but demonstrates the theological basis of the wording.

⁵⁹ Carl F. H. Henry, “The Uses and Abuses of Historical Criticism,” in *God, Revelation, and Authority* (Waco, TX: Word, 1979) 393.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 401.

⁶¹ Farnell, *Jesus Crisis* 222.

⁶² Dennis A. Hutchison, “Impact of Historical Criticism on Preaching,” in *Jesus Crisis* 351.

book are going to war, and dialogue is no longer possible. (3) Thomas concludes the book by calling for the church to raise “her voice against the enemy who already has his foot in the door,” language that virtually accuses evangelical HCs of satanic influence (note the singular “his”). Such radical charges divide evangelicals and make unity in the church (John 17:20–23) impossible.

On the other hand, Geisler’s advice is helpful: to avoid the desire to become a famous scholar, to avoid the temptation to be unique for its own sake, to avoid dancing on the edge, to avoid trading orthodoxy for academic respectability, and to reject methodology inconsistent with the Bible.⁶³ However, we must also be careful not to reject methods that can become very useful when false presuppositions are removed. FC, TC, and RC become enemies of the veracity of Scripture only when imbibed with the radical skepticism of negative criticism. When utilized under the aegis of an inerrant Scripture, they become positive, helpful tools.

⁶³ Geisler, “Beware of Philosophy” 17–20.