

Why the Historical-Critical Method of Interpreting Scripture is Incompatible with Confessional Lutheranism

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In our first lecture we learned how Lutheranism in America has been divided by the dispute concerning the inerrancy of Scripture. Closely related to this issue is the disagreement about whether confessional Lutherans can use the so-called historical-critical method of interpreting Scripture. Lutherans who deny the inerrancy of Scripture also accept the historical-critical method of interpreting Scripture. Those who believe in the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible also reject the historical-critical method.

The aim of this lecture is to show that the use of the historical-critical method is incompatible with confessional Lutheranism. This method must be rejected by everyone who believes in the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible. The historical-critical method must be rejected by confessional Lutherans because it is contrary to what the Bible reveals about itself. The historical-critical method must be rejected by confessional Lutherans because it destroys confidence in all of the doctrines of Scripture.

The traditional way of interpreting the Bible, which has been practiced by Bible-believing Christians for hundreds of years, has been called the grammatical-historical method. According to this method the job of the interpreter of the Bible is to carefully study the meaning of the words and the grammar of the biblical text to determine what the original author meant by them. The interpreter's first assignment is to understand what a given passage of Scripture means. Then the interpreter can apply the truth taught in that passage to his hearers. The interpreter has no right to pass judgement on Scripture or to change its message. He is simply to report what it says. He has no right to add anything to Scripture nor to subtract anything from it. In this method Scripture rules over the beliefs of the church.

The historical-critical method encourages the interpreter to subject Scripture to human judgement. The critic not only studies Scripture to determine what the author meant to say. He also judges whether or not that passage is acceptable to the church today. In this method the theologians of the church pass judgement on Scripture, rather than being judged by Scripture.

Some Differences Between The Grammatical-Historical Method and The Historical-Critical Method

1) The grammatical-historical method treats the Bible as a unique book. Since it is the only book given by inspiration of God, it contains no errors, and it cannot be judged by the same critical standards which are used to judge the reliability of merely human works.

1) The historical-critical method claims that the Bible should be judged by the same standards of reliability and believability which are used to judge any other work of literature or history. In actual practice, however, critics place the Bible lower than other historical sources, since they almost always believe the heathen source rather than the Bible if there is a disagreement between an Egyptian or Mesopotamian document and the Bible.

2) The grammatical-historical method accepts the Bible's claims about its origin. Grammatical-historical interpreters believe the Bible's statements that Moses wrote the Pentateuch, David wrote most of the psalms, and Paul wrote the epistles attributed to him.

2) The historical-critical method rejects these statements about the authorship of the biblical books. Those who practice this method believe that these books were written much later than the time of Moses, David, and Paul by unknown authors, or that these books were gradually assembled by many writers and editors over many centuries.

3) The grammatical-historical method believes that since all Scripture ultimately comes from one author, the Holy Spirit, Scripture is a unity. It does not contradict itself. Passages of Scripture must be interpreted so that they agree with each other, not in a way which makes them contradict each other. Although God revealed more details about his plan of salvation as the centuries passed, from Genesis to Revelation the Bible teaches only one theology—the Gospel of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

3) The historical-critical method believes that there are many different and contradictory theologies in the Bible. Religion evolved over time, so the religion of early Israel was very different from that of the end of the Old Testament era. The theology of Jesus was different from that of Paul, which was in turn different from the theology of the 1st or 2nd century churches which produced the books of the New Testament. Since there are many different theologies in the Bible, we can choose which ones we want to believe.

4) The grammatical-historical method uses historical and archeological information to understand the text better. For example, a knowledge of political conditions in the Persian Empire helps us understand why the Persian kings in the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther followed the policies which they did.

4) The historical-critical method uses historical sources and interpretations of archeological finds to reject certain statements of the Bible. If archeologists claim that there was no city at Jericho or Ai at the time of Joshua, the critic rejects the biblical accounts of the destruction of those cities. (Closer examination of the remains of Jericho has revealed ruins there from the time of Joshua. Archeologists are probably looking for the ruins of Ai at the wrong site.)

5) The grammatical-historical method uses the context of a passage to determine whether a passage is literally true or if it is figurative or symbolical. Genesis is classified as a historical book by the book itself and by the New Testament. For example, Adam and Eve are described as real people in Genesis and in the New Testament (Luke 3, Romans 5). The Gospels describe Jesus' miracles as acts which he really performed for real people. His parables are described as stories he told to illustrate a point. The book of Revelation specifically says that it uses symbols to describe real things. The dragon in Revelation 12 is not a reptile but a symbol of Satan. The context of Genesis indicates that we should understand the six days of creation as real days, consisting of an evening and a morning. The context of Revelation indicates that we should understand the 1000 years of Revelation 20 as a symbolic term for the whole New Testament era.

5) The historical critical method uses outside sources and human reason to judge which parts of the Bible are historically true. If science says man evolved from lower life over millions of years, the critic rejects the creation account of Genesis. If historians cannot find a record of the census which Luke mentions in connection with Jesus' birth, critics reject it as an invention of the writer of Luke's gospel.

6) The grammatical-historical method uses the context of Scripture to determine which commands of Scripture apply to us today. Since the New Testament clearly says in Colossians 2 and Hebrews that the Old Testament sabbath and sacrifices no longer apply to us, we do not make them binding on the church.

6) The historical-critical method uses outside sources and human judgement to determine which commands of Scripture apply to us. If modern social science accepts homosexual practice as simply an "alternate life-style," the critic rejects Paul's warning against homosexuality and other forms of sexual immorality in Romans 1 as old-fashioned and irrelevant.

7) The grammatical-historical method believes that the miracles and prophecies of the Bible are real acts, which display God's power.

7) The historical-critical method is based on the assumption that miracles and prophecy are impossible. The biblical accounts of the plagues in Egypt or of Jesus' miracles could not have been written by eye-witnesses since miracles do not happen. Therefore, the accounts which describe these events must have been written much later than the alleged events. Daniel lived in the 6th century before Christ. Therefore, he could not have written Daniel 11 which describes events which occurred in the 2nd century B.C. This part of Daniel must have been written in the 2nd century B.C. after these events happened. If critical scholars of the Bible believed in the reality of miracles and prophecy, and if they accepted the permanent relevance of God's moral law, there would be no historical-critical method. This method was invented to condone unbelief.

These are a few of the principle differences between the grammatical-historical method and the historical-critical method of studying the Bible. Let us now turn our attention to the effect which the historical-critical method has had in American Lutheranism.

The Effects of The Historical-critical Method On the Theology of American Lutheranism

As we heard in our first lecture the ELCA endorses and practices the historical-critical method of interpreting the Bible. It is the only method which may be used in ELCA seminaries. The grammatical-historical method is excluded.

Let us return for a moment to two statements from one of the leading theologians of ELCA to see what effect the historical-critical method has had on ELCA's theology.

Fundamentalist biblicism [that is, inerrancy] is rejected by most theologians and is out of favor in most of the seminaries that train clergy for the parish ministry. They reject biblicism not merely because historical science has disclosed errors and contradictions in the biblical writings, but rather because the authority of the Bible is elevated at the expense of the authority of Christ and his gospel.

Today it is impossible to assure the historicity of the things recorded. What the biblical authors report is not accepted as a literal transcript of the factual course of events. Therefore, critical scholars inquire behind the text and attempt to reconstruct the real history that took place. (I, 76)

Both quotations clearly indicate that in ELCA historical science (another name for the historical critical method) is used to judge which parts of the Bible are true. The disastrous effects of this approach upon any attempt to write a summary of Christian doctrine are exposed by the following statement from ELCA:

Critical attention to what the texts actually say has exploded the notion that one orthodox dogmatics can be mined out of Scripture. There are different theological tendencies and teachings in the various texts. Ecumenically this has led to the practical conclusion that the traditional demand for a complete consensus of doctrine may be wrong-headed, if even the Scriptures fail to contain such a consensus. (I, 77)

An example of the application of this approach to a specific doctrine is provided by the dialogues between Lutherans and Roman Catholics concerning justification. Those Lutherans who practice the historical-critical method claim that the Bible contains contradictory doctrines of justification Paul teaches justification by faith alone; James teaches salvation by faith and works. Therefore, the participants in the Lutheran-Catholic dialogues agreed to accept both the Catholic and Lutheran doctrines of justification as equally valid.

Today in ELCA the doctrine that Christ's death was a payment for sin is accepted as one of several equally valid theories explaining the meaning of Christ's death. The Lutheran, the official magazine of ELCA, answered a reader's question in this way.

Question: Is it true Jesus was born so he could die on the cross?

Answer: Jesus was born not to die, but to live for us. If Jesus was born simply to die, Herod's soldiers could have killed him as a baby. The cross is central to our preaching because it shows the depth of God's love for us . . . Some preaching describes Jesus' death as a payment to God's wrath. This approach stresses guilt as a barrier to our entry into heaven. There is truth here, but

this is only one of many ways the Scriptures proclaim the meaning of Jesus for us. (Mar. 30, 1988, p. 46)

Orthodox, traditional belief is permitted for laypeople, as long as they do not oppose the historical-critical belief. This is shown by another question and answer from *The Lutheran*:

Question: Is it now considered naive or even heresy for Lutherans to believe that Adam and Eve were real people?

Answer: For centuries the church believed in the actual existence of Adam and Eve. Recent scholarship suggests that the significance of the Adam and Eve stories is not their literal truth or lack of it but the theological points they make about the creation of humankind in God's image. If someone believes Adam and Eve were historic people, and this view is helpful to their Christian life, it is not good ministry to rip such a viewpoint from them. Nor should the faith of those who understand these stories in a symbolic way be questioned. (June 22, 1988, p. 42)

As a final illustration of the effects of the historical-critical method on doctrine discussions let us look at an issue which is troubling American Lutheranism: In what roles may women serve in the church? May they serve as pastors or in other roles in the church which would require them to exercise authority over men?

This is a very big question which we cannot discuss in detail today. If this is a matter of debate also here in Finland, I can provide you with more materials about it or perhaps we can discuss it on some other occasion. Today I am interested only in showing some of the ways in which the historical-critical approach changes a church's views on this question.

Example 1) In Gal. 3:28 Paul says, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." In 1 Corinthians 11 and 14 and 1 Timothy 2 Paul speaks of a difference between the roles of men and women.

The critic says these passages contradict each other, so we can choose which to believe. The critic accepts Galatians 3 and rejects the other passages.

The person who practices the grammatical-historical approach starts with the assumption that Scripture does not contradict itself. He carefully studies the context of all the passages. He finds that the passages are talking about two different things. Galatians 3 is talking about the equality of men and women in their relationship to God and in matters pertaining to salvation. The other three passages are talking about differences between men and women in their relationships to each other. There is no contradiction between the passages. All of them must be allowed to stand.

Example 2) Those who practice the grammatical-historical method believe that all of the passages in question were given by inspiration of God and written by Paul.

Those who practice the historical-critical method believe that Paul did not write 2 Timothy and that the verses about women being silent in the church in 1 Corinthians 14 were not written by Paul, but inserted later. These verses may therefore be ignored.

Example 3) Those who practice the historical-critical method believe that Paul wrote as a person subject to the ignorance and prejudice of his times and, therefore, we do not have to accept his views today. This is shown by a quotation from the Lutheran.

Question: Some Lutheran churches do not ordain women, using 1 Timothy 2:11-15 as their primary justification. How can ELCA ordain women in light of this?

Answer: Paul in 1 Timothy reflects the desire to continue the customs in which he had been trained before his conversion. He failed to see the full meaning of his own witness (Gal. 3:28). He was misled by the Pharisaic tradition. We do an injustice to Paul and to this text if we elevate his pastoral counsel to a divine, unchangeable law (Nov. 23,1988).

Those who practice the grammatical-historical method study Paul's commands in context to see if they are temporary orders given only to people of Paul's own day or if they are based on a permanent moral standard established by God:

**In 1 Corinthians 11 Paul tells the women in Corinth to have a covering on their heads (v 5, 14). He says he is dealing with a "custom" or a "practice" (v 14). It is a matter of propriety (v 13). The women in Corinth should not violate this custom for doing so would cause offense. In times and places which do not have this custom Paul's directions would not be applicable.

**In the same chapter Paul says man is the head of woman (v 3). He says that the reason for this is that God created woman from and for man (v 8,9). Since this principle is based on an order established by God at creation, it applies to all people in all times.

**In 1 Corinthians 14 Paul says women should be silent in the church (v 34). He says this command is based on the Law (v 34) and that it is a command of the Lord (v 37). Furthermore, anybody who ignores this command will be ignored by God (v 37,38).

**In 1 Timothy 2 Paul says women should not have authority over a man, (v 12). As reasons for this command he gives the order established in creation (v 13) and the departure from this order in the Fall into sin (v 14). Since these commands are based on an order established by God at creation, it is clear that they apply to all people.

Example 4) Those who practice the historical-critical method claim that Paul's commands are not addressed to men and women in general but to adherents of some unmentioned cult at Ephesus and the relevance of these texts to us today must be judged by experts in ancient heathen cults.

Those who practice the grammatical-historical method believe God's Word was given to be read and understood by the lay people of congregations. It is not the private domain of a class of professional theologians. The Bible is its own interpreter. Its message can be read and understood without outside information which is accessible only to professional scholars.

We believe that it is desirable that all pastors should be trained in Hebrew and Greek and in the history and customs of Bible times so that they can evaluate all translations and studies of the Bible for themselves. But we also believe that an accurate translation of the Bible is the Word of God and that lay people should search the Scriptures to judge what they are being taught, just as the Bereans did.

One of the most dangerous things about the historical-critical method is that it is designed to take the ability to judge doctrine away from ordinary pastors and laypeople. During the Seminec controversy in the LC-MS one of the seminary professors who practiced the historical-critical method asked scornfully how some farmer could dare to question his teaching. He claimed that only a professional theologian, trained in critical methods, was qualified to judge his teaching. We reject this view and agree with the view of a much better theologian who said, "From infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2. Tim 3:15-17)." If you believe this, and if you use the treasure which has been entrusted to you in the Holy Scriptures, you will be thoroughly equipped to teach the truth and to rebuke error, to warn against sin and train in righteousness.

Conclusion

The historical-critical method, which rejects the inerrancy of Scripture and which sets itself up as the judge of the Bible, is deadly poison. It robs God's people of the clear teaching of Scripture. It sows uncertainty and doubt in the church. It presumptuously sets itself above the Word of God.

God has given us a better way. "In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry" (2 Timothy 4:1-5). This is the duty of every pastor. To support and help such faithful ministers is the duty of every lay person.

Today throughout the world Satan is mounting an all-out attack against God's Word of Truth. The church and every individual are being tested. Each one of us is being asked, "Where do you stand?" The battle is fierce, but those who keep Jesus Word have his command and his promise:

See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.... Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth. I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. (Revelation 3:8-13)

In these last days, may God give us all the wisdom and the courage to stand firmly on the foundation of his errorless Word—to believe it with all our hearts, to proclaim it with all our strength, and to defend it our very lives. May the Lord keep us all faithful till he returns.