

MATTHEAN PRIORITY/AUTHORSHIP AND EVANGELICALISM'S BOUNDARY

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Evangelicals' experimentation with critical methodology has resulted in questions being raised about long-held viewpoints regarding the priority of Matthew as the first Gospel to be written and about whether Matthew himself actually wrote the Gospel. Such questions recall instances in the recent past when what looked like a minor departure from a traditional belief soon became an issue of questioning the authority and inerrancy of Scripture. Historical-critical approaches to Scripture have, over time, proven to be a threat to evangelicalism's traditional view of Scripture in both doctrinal and practical realms. The movement among evangelicals to embrace Markan instead of Matthean priority appears to be another first step away from the valued evangelical view of Scripture, because it assumes that someone other than an eyewitness of Jesus' life composed the Gospel of Matthew. The church fathers were unanimous in naming Matthew as the first Gospel to be written and in identifying the apostle Matthew as its author. Their testimony indicates that it was the dominant Gospel in the early church and contains nothing about any literary dependence between writers of the two Gospels. The issue of apostolic authorship is at stake in one's viewpoint on this matter. If at any point a Gospel writer, be it pseudo-Matthew or any other Gospel writer, has embellished eyewitness testimony to promote his own theological viewpoint, that is a violation of biblical inerrancy that lies outside the boundary of evangelicalism.

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Historical Criticism, a First Step toward Errancy?

The place in order of composition among the four Gospels and authorship of the Gospel of Matthew was not questioned until the rise of critical scholarship. Evangelicals continued to accept both until recent decades when representatives of

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the movement began to experiment with critical methods. Initially, conservative evangelicals rejected the ideas of the liberal critics.¹ Nonetheless, the trend has been to adopt critical methods in order to “dialogue” with critical scholars under the assumption that their methods in and of themselves are not flawed, just their presuppositions. Additionally, only the antisupernatural presuppositions undergirding their methods should be rejected. This trend has become more and more apparent over the last decade as an attitude of “pushing the limits” of evangelicalism has grown. The question of the day seems to be: How liberal is too liberal and how much of critical scholarship’s methods *and* presuppositions are acceptable without crossing the boundaries of evangelicalism?

In the early eighties, when Robert Gundry in his commentary on Matthew’s Gospel took the redaction-critical method too far, the Evangelical Theological Society censured him and requested his resignation.² But others have used the same method with similar presuppositions and conclusions, couched in less direct language, without being censured.

Evangelical publications contain articles in which those who choose not to use critical methods are described in anything but conciliatory terms. For example, Robert Guelich is critical of those who reject the use of critical methods and talks of a “consensus” among those scholars “who have worked extensively in the gospels themselves” while “the evangelical scene at large—including lay people, pastors, colleagues in other theological disciplines, and *even some in Biblical studies*—still operates on the basis of the gospels’ being essentially verbal snapshots whose red-letter editions highlight the very words of Jesus,” i.e., a naive approach.³ Donald Hagner describes those unwilling to use critical methods as guilty of a “docetic view of Scripture.”⁴ John Piper accuses traditionalists as being guilty of “epistemological

¹Though Grant Osborne argues for its acceptance by representative leaders of evangelicalism, Robert Thomas amply responds to his misuse of history (Grant R. Osborne, “Historical Criticism and the Evangelical,” *JETS* 42 [1999]:193; Robert L. Thomas, “Historical Criticism and the Evangelical: Another View,” *JETS* 43 [2000]:98-99).

²Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 623-40. For example, Gundry identified what he considered Matthew’s changes to the story and then argued for his use of midrashist and haggadist “embroidery” of the traditions with no attempt at historicity, comparable to recent novelists who write historical fiction. He says most clearly, “Comparisons with the other gospels, especially with Mark and Luke, and examination of Matthew’s style and theology show that he materially altered and embellished historical traditions and that he did so deliberately and often. ... Matthew’s intent was to tell the story of Jesus with alterations and embellishments suited to the needs of the church and the world at the time the gospel was written” (639).

³Robert A. Guelich, “The Gospels: Portraits of Jesus and His Ministry,” *JETS* 24 (1981):122 (123, emphasis added). Yet, when he lists what must be accepted by evangelicals to proceed with an evangelical use of critical methods, he lists thoroughly liberal presuppositions.

⁴Donald A. Hagner, “Interpreting the Gospels: The Landscape and the Quest,” *JETS* 24 (1981):26.

fiat, which we deny to every other religion.”⁵

Though some evangelical scholars have expressed disapproval,⁶ the legitimacy of their disapproval has been questioned.⁷ Noting a “new series of attacks against the viability of higher critical methodologies” in his article critical of *The Jesus Crisis*,⁸ Grant Osborne responds to Robert Thomas by saying, “In the fourteen years until *The Jesus Crisis* appeared, there were no attacks on the orthodoxy of evangelical redaction critics.”⁹ This ignores the works of Eta Linnemann, someone eminently qualified to know the dangers higher critical methods pose to evangelicals, published in 1990 and 1992, and the statements of Norm Geisler in 1998.¹⁰ Linnemann has continued her warnings to evangelicals in her latest work, *Biblical Criticism on Trial: How Scientific is “Scientific Theology”*?¹¹ Significant scholars have been objecting. But have they been given a hearing?

In 1976 Harold Lindsell, as one of the founding fathers of Fuller seminary, created a firestorm with his exposure of the seminary's departure from evangelicalism. He described inerrancy as a “watershed question” for evangelicalism as a movement.¹² He warned then that departure from inerrancy would lead to further

⁵John Piper, “Historical Criticism in the Dock: Recent Developments in Germany,” *JETS* 23 (1980):325-34. He gives two alternatives, “make one's starting point the unity and infallibility of Scripture and ... rule out the use of criticism” or “renounce this sort of epistemological fiat, which we deny to every other religion and to ourselves in every other area of life” and use critical methods (333). He chose the critical option and used Stuhlmacher as an example of a believing critical scholar in Germany.

⁶Thomas, “The Hermeneutics of Evangelical Redaction Criticism” *JETS* 29/4 (June 1989):447-59; idem, “Historical Criticism and the Evangelical: Another View” 97-111; Robert L. Thomas and F. David Farnell, eds., *The Jesus Crisis* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998); and Eta Linnemann, *Is There a Synoptic Problem?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992).

⁷Osborne, “Historical Criticism and the Evangelical” 193-210; and “Historical Criticism: A Brief Response to Robert Thomas's ‘Other View,’” *JETS* 43 (2000):113-17.

⁸Osborne, “Historical Criticism and the Evangelical” 195.

⁹Osborne, “Historical Criticism: A Brief Response to Robert Thomas's ‘Other View’” 113.

¹⁰Linnemann, *Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology?*, trans. Robert W. Yarbrough (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990); idem, *Is There a Synoptic Problem?* Norm Geisler's presidential address to the Evangelical Theological Society, published in *JETS* 42 (1999):3-19.

¹¹(Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001).

¹²Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) 23. Fuller Seminary, per Lindsell, was founded to “be an apologetic institution” that “would provide the finest theological defense of biblical infallibility or inerrancy. It was agreed in addition that the faculty would publish joint works that would represent to the world the best of evangelical scholarship on inerrancy at a time when there was a dearth of such scholarship and when there were few learned works promoting biblical inerrancy” (ibid., 106-7).

departures in orthodox faith over time.¹³ He identified the historical-critical method as “a debilitating influence which brings with it decline and decay for the church.”¹⁴ He described the method as destructive, not neutral.¹⁵ He said then, and it still stands true, “Today an increasing number of evangelicals do not wish to make inerrancy a test for fellowship even though ordinary consistency requires an evangelical to believe it.”¹⁶ But, “any definition of what evangelicals believe must include biblical inerrancy.”¹⁷

Compare Lindsell’s assessment of Fuller Seminary with that of Alan Wolfe who describes Fuller as “conservative.” In his *Atlantic Monthly* article entitled “The Opening of the Evangelical Mind,” Wolfe draws a distinction between an evangelical and a so-called fundamentalist.¹⁸ The recent use of “fundamentalist” as a pejorative designation has become postevangelicals’ way of justifying their departure from evangelicalism’s traditional view of Scripture and silencing any objectors. If one objects to the theological shift, he is not a modern thinker. He is not progressive. He is not *really* evangelical. He is a “fundamentalist” with all its nuances of ignorance, intractableness, and intolerance.

Wolfe’s version of evangelicals is what he calls moving forward with “the rest of American religion” while “fundamentalists moved backward.”¹⁹ And, Fuller Seminary is his model of a “conservative evangelical” institution that illustrates “the sensitivity of the evangelical mind.”²⁰ Where Lindsell warned of erosion of other

¹³Ibid., 120-21. Lindsell notes, “No matter how sincere a man may be, and however carefully he guards against further theological concessions, they are inevitable once inerrancy is given up” (142). And he warns, “The second generation will follow through on the implications contained in the abandonment of inerrancy and will make concessions on questions that pertain to matters of faith and practice as well as to matters of history, science, and chronology” (159). This warning was repeated in *The Bible in the Balance* ([Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979] 184).

¹⁴Ibid., 275.

¹⁵Ibid., 283. He says, “Anyone who thinks the historical-critical method is neutral is misinformed. Since its presuppositions are unacceptable to the evangelical mind this method cannot be used by the evangelical as it stands. ... It appears to me that modern evangelical scholars (and I may have been guilty of this myself) have played fast and loose with the term perhaps because they wanted acceptance by academia. They seem too often to desire to be members of the club which is nothing more than practicing an inclusiveness that undercuts the normativity of the evangelical theological position. This may be done, and often is, under the illusion that by this method the opponents of biblical inerrancy can be won over to the evangelical viewpoint. But practical experience suggests that rarely does this happen and the cost of such an approach is too expensive, for it gives credence and lends respectability to a method which is the deadly enemy of theological orthodoxy.”

¹⁶Ibid., 303.

¹⁷Ibid., 306.

¹⁸Alan Wolfe, “The Opening of the Evangelical Mind,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 286/4 (October 2000):58.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid., 65.

doctrines as a consequence of departing from an inerrant Scripture, Wolfe praises Fuller Seminary for having “evolved a ‘Don’t ask, don’t tell’ policy with respect to homosexuality.”²¹ Fuller is acceptable to him precisely because it pursues all the “politically correct” issues of our humanist media and liberal colleges.²² Yet, can a school be said to have a high view of Scripture when it does not disallow lifestyles that the Scriptures condemn in no uncertain terms? Is this where evangelicalism should be going?

Lindsell’s questions need to be asked again, “When does one cease to be an evangelical? ... How many of the tenets of evangelicalism can one surrender without forfeiting the right to the use of the evangelical label?” Also, “Does the denial of any *one* of the basic evangelical tenets mean that a person has forfeited the right to the use of the term?”²³

In 1980 J. Barton Payne warned against evangelicals using critical methods in order to gain acceptance by the critical community, the *academy*. He wrote, “No theory of literary origins may be considered legitimate that calls into question the historicity of the biblical content it is seeking to explain.”²⁴ He posed the question back then about “limits—of deciding just how far the critic can or should go.”²⁵ Payne gave the example from Matthew’s Gospel of the baptismal formula in the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20) and rejected an appeal to literary genre, called “gospel,” in which the redactor legitimately “reshapes the historical tradition” as justification for denying its historical accuracy.²⁶ The needs of the community—its

²¹Ibid.

²²He defends the school by saying, “It would be inaccurate to describe Fuller’s faculty as liberal. These men and women are, theologically speaking, conservatives; they have all signed Fuller’s credal [sic] statement emphasizing that the Old and New Testaments ‘are the written word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice.’ Yet Fuller’s widespread culture of care means that the faculty is hardly right-wing either. ... Once we leave homosexuality and other contentious issues behind, and focus on the way wealth and power are distributed around the world, Fuller seems little different from other campuses that have made issues of globalization and poverty central to their concerns” (ibid., 68).

²³Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* 308 (emphasis in the original).

²⁴J. Barton Payne, “Higher Criticism and Biblical Inerrancy,” in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980) 99.

²⁵Ibid., 90.

²⁶Ibid., 97-98. Payne says, “If ... we follow redaction criticism concerning the Great Commission’s formula for baptism ... and conclude ‘that at some point the tradition of Matthew expanded an original monadic formula ... to make Jesus’ teachings meaningful to their own *Sitz im Leben* rather than to present them unedited,’ we indulge in illegitimate negative higher criticism, especially if we raise questions against the reliability of Matthew’s autograph. The apostle specifies in his inspired statements that Jesus spoke this baptismal formula (28:18) and gives the circumstances of its verbal composition: It was uttered in Galilee, on a mountain, to the eleven disciples who had witnessed Jesus’ resurrection (28:17). We are therefore committed to the validity of God’s inerrant Word. ... This example from the first Gospel raises a crucial issue that seems to be emerging among conservative scholars today. Some interpreters consider themselves advocates of inerrancy, but are willing, nevertheless, to grant the

Sitz im Leben—do not justify lying about what happened.

Eta Linnemann's warning just over a decade ago still needs to be heeded. She identifies the influence of German liberal theology, termed "historical-critical theology," as a very real, though insidious, threat to evangelicalism. It arose from the use of historical-critical methods and presuppositions by German liberal scholars.²⁷ In this system of thought, she notes, "The concept *Holy Scripture* is relativized so that the Bible is nothing more than a religious writing like all other religious writings."²⁸ The foundational presupposition of the approach is that "the content of biblical writings is seen as merely the creation of theological writers, any given verse is nothing more than a non-binding, human theological utterance."²⁹ As a result, "What the text clearly states can, by no means, be true. The exegete's task is to *discover* and *solve* 'difficulties' in the text of the Bible. The better the interpreter, the more ingenious this will be. For to amount to anything a professor must 'make a name.'³⁰

But what is the problem of the literary criticism being practiced by evangelicals today? Linnemann notes that in this form of literary criticism every question raised "is answered on the basis of assumptions," none that can be verified, but all made "tenable through their plausibility and through the researcher's artistry of grounding his assumptions in argumentation."³¹ Further, the danger of choosing to accept certain critical assumptions while denying others, is the fact that because they are so intimately related, "knit together," that "bringing in one of them tends to call forth them all."³² She rejects two things characteristic of critical studies, whether done by liberals or evangelicals, in that they end up in "pointless controversies and rationalistic quests for novelty."³³

existence of erroneous statements in Scripture about the circumstances of the origin of a given passage. The errors are due to the literary genre, or form (namely, the gospels) in which the statements occur. Since the Bible contains such literary figures as hyperbole and parable, both of which are fictional, could it not be, they argue, that the Gospels form a particular type of Christian literary genre, in which a redactor, in the interests of his theological message, reshapes the historical tradition he has received? The message is thus said to prevail over historical accuracy, with no attempt to deceive being intended by the author/redactor. In other words, the question is simply one of exegesis and hermeneutics, not of errancy. ... An author who intends to use a fictional form should make this fact, as well as his reason for using such a form, clear to his readers. The four Gospels, however, contain no clues that they are fictional in the sense claimed by those using the methods of current redaction criticism."

²⁷Linnemann, *Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology?* 84.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 84-85 (emphasis in the original).

²⁹*Ibid.*, 86.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 87 (emphasis in the original).

³¹*Ibid.*, 94.

³²*Ibid.*, 95.

³³*Ibid.*, 111-12.

In his paper entitled "The Social Effect of Biblical Criticism," Walter Sundberg, who describes himself as a member of a liberal church, acknowledges that a critical approach to Scripture "is a serious problem for any community of faith that reveres the Bible as the authoritative source of divine revelation and assumes that its fundamental meaning is clear to the average believer and enduring across the ages."³⁴ He describes the "disruption" higher criticism has produced in "liberal and mainline churches" as it has resulted in "a group that lacks conviction."³⁵ He acknowledges as legitimate Linnemann's "witness to a negative social effect of biblical studies that is felt by more pastors and scholars than is often acknowledged."³⁶ And, as Linnemann has said, he acknowledges that it is precisely

because biblical criticism holds to a set of philosophical presuppositions, originating in the Enlightenment, which inexorably brings it in opposition to the church. Individual biblical scholars may embrace these presuppositions, ignore them, or try to resist them as they go about their work. But the discipline as a whole cannot escape them. These presuppositions involve deep-rooted assumptions or modes of thought that exercise extraordinary influence on academic and religious perceptions. . . . They are usually of such inescapable force that they place limits on the possibilities of dialogue with an opposing point of view.³⁷

Yet, having described its dangers and the harm it has done to his own denomination, Sundberg still considers it necessary to teach the method while informing "believers that the discipline of biblical criticism comes with a price tag," a "cost" to the church.³⁸

In contrast to Linnemann, Grant Osborne is an example of an evangelical scholar who believes that one can both use critical methods and remain evangelical when those methods are "properly used."³⁹ He contrasts his approach on the one hand to "radical criticism" and on the other hand to traditional evangelicalism, labeled by him as "fundamentalism."⁴⁰ According to him, radical critics are "Arian"

³⁴Walter Sundberg, "The Social Effect of Biblical Criticism," in *Renewing Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Craig Bartholomew, Colin Greene, and Karl Möller (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000) 69, 80.

³⁵Ibid., 72-73.

³⁶Ibid., 69.

³⁷Ibid., 77-78.

³⁸Ibid., 80.

³⁹For example, he says that "redaction criticism, properly used, is a positive tool for biblical research, and evangelicals should be in the forefront of research into its constructive possibilities" (Osborne, "Redaction Criticism and the Great Commission: A Case Study Toward a Biblical Understanding of Inerrancy," *JETS* 19 [1976]:73).

⁴⁰In "Historical Criticism and the Evangelical," Osborne's objection to Robert Thomas' language is a similar smoke screen that blurs the real life-and-death issue the church faces over this issue (*JETS* 42 [1999]:209).

in their approach to Scripture while traditional evangelicals are “Docetic.” He, on the other hand, is “Athanasian,” combining “the human and divine elements in a God-ordained tension that recognizes the interplay between both aspects behind the origin of the sacred text.”⁴¹ Using the Great Commission in Matthew’s Gospel to model an evangelical redaction critical approach, he seems to argue for an inspired alteration of history by an editor.⁴² Two years later, he clarifies his position: while seeing the evangelists as editors reflecting later church issues, “we refuse to view them as playwrights who construct scenes to fit a later theological emphasis that Christ never intended. Instead, they apply the data from Christ’s life and teaching to their later *Sitz im Leben*.”⁴³ In another follow-up article, he provides further clarification by affirming that the evangelists “never twisted or created new meaning” or data,⁴⁴ though they did “paraphrase” Jesus’ words, but not “out of keeping with the original occurrence.”⁴⁵

In Osborne’s defense, he clarifies his view and defines evangelical

⁴¹Osborne, “Redaction Criticism and the Great Commission” 83.

⁴²He began by affirming, “Too often we have accepted the negative criteria of the radical critics as the only mode within which redactional work may be done. But redaction criticism, properly used, is a positive tool for Biblical research, and evangelicals should be in the forefront of research into its constructive possibilities” (ibid., 73). But then he accepted certain critical assumptions that cut at the heart of inerrancy, while still saying he held to inerrancy. He describes the Great Commission in higher critical terms as having “its foundation in tradition” and being “redacted by Matthew” (ibid., 74). He concludes that “It would seem that the tradition came to Matthew, possibly via Mark, as a single whole, but that he stated it in his own style and words” (ibid., 75). What Osborne seems to be saying in this article, ultimately, is that whoever this “Matthew” is, he is not an eyewitness who heard those words spoken by the Lord. He received them from a “tradition” that had developed, possibly being passed on by Mark. And, he *altered* it for his own purposes, under inspiration. Osborne justifies this later in his article by arguing for inspired alteration of history by an editor. He says further, “(1) Matthew was not freely composing but sought to interpret the true meaning of Jesus’ message for his own day; (2) both *ipsissima verba* and *ipsissima vox* are inspired words of God” (ibid., 80). But what of Matthew’s account? He says, “[I]t is difficult, if not impossible, to trace the exact words that Jesus spoke on the mountain in Galilee. However, we can know that Matthew has faithfully reproduced the intent and meaning of what Jesus said. In fact, we can rejoice because Matthew has rephrased it in such a way that it illuminates his entire gospel and applies the meaning of Jesus’ life and ministry to the present mission and responsibility of the church” (ibid., 85).

⁴³Osborne, “The Evangelical and *Traditionsgeschichte*,” *JETS* 21 (1978):128-29. He precedes this by saying “that the gospels were written by men who selected and shaped the traditions to present a certain theological theme. The selection and shaping process, however, did not involve creating or changing the historical data. Therefore there is no danger in a positive approach to redaction or traditional criticism” (ibid., 127). This is a welcome clarification. In this article, though, he argues that, “Inerrancy is based on inspiration, and the latter covers both fact (the original event) and interpretation (the explanation of the ramifications of the event for the readers). There is no dichotomy between the two, and there is no ‘error’ in the latter aspect” (ibid., 127-28). Unfortunately, his example of interpretation involves alteration of the original event.

⁴⁴Osborne, “The Evangelical and Redaction Criticism: Critique and Methodology,” *JETS* 22/4 (1979):322.

⁴⁵Ibid., 311.

redaction criticism as meaning “that the writer selected 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.” He also defends his approach by noting that his doctoral dissertation defended the historicity of the synoptic differences, saying that he argued “that all the redactional changes were historical and that the authors under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit were selecting different details from the original historical event.”⁴⁶ This is something a so-called “fundamentalist” non-redactionist would say. But, concern needs to be expressed about other statements, such as that “the evangelist was free to expand, omit or paraphrase on the basis of what Jesus had originally said and done.”⁴⁷ Also holding to Markan priority raises problems since it necessarily assumes that Matthew used and consciously modified Mark’s account for his own theological purposes. It is this conscious modification of inspired, inerrant text that is the concern. Again, evangelicals must ask, how far is too far?

Is the movement to accept the higher critic’s doctrine of Markan priority a departure from evangelicalism, or a legitimate option that one may hold in clear conscience? It seems that a growing number of evangelical scholars are opting for Markan priority in synoptic studies. But is it evangelical?

Markan Priority and Inerrancy

Is the Markan prioritist moving away from evangelicalism’s core belief in inerrancy? Does not the approach necessarily accept certain liberal-critical presuppositions and propositions that would seem to mandate a lower view of inspired Scripture?

To defend Markan priority one *must* assume someone other than an eyewitness of Jesus’ life, the apostle himself, composed Matthew and used Mark and other “traditions” as his source. Yes, some Markan prioritists argue that Matthew himself actually used Mark. But why would an eyewitness *need* or even *want* to use someone else’s account? This is especially difficult to understand in light of Jesus’ personal promise to Matthew and the other eyewitnesses of His ministry that the Holy Spirit would “bring to your [their] remembrance all things that I said to you” (John 14:26).⁴⁸

To arrive at Markan priority is to accept the methods, and key presuppositions, of liberal scholarship that have chosen to deny the overwhelming evidence

⁴⁶Osborne, “Historical Criticism and the Evangelical,” 208-9.

⁴⁷Ibid., 208.

⁴⁸Though some apply this promise to the church as a whole, it has its most specific referent in the apostles dining with Jesus that evening, including Matthew. It is difficult to take “all things that I said to you” and change it to “those oral or written traditions circulating through the church in a few decades,” or “just the concepts but not the actual words,” or “a general gist of what was said.”

contradictory to their purely speculative theories.⁴⁹ The Markan prioritist must ignore the external evidence of history by rejecting the witness of the earliest church fathers. But why does one find this necessary? It is necessary only because liberal scholars over the last century have rejected that witness. The earliest church fathers emphasized both the priority and Matthean authorship of the NT's first Gospel. John Rist's work, *On the Independence of Matthew and Mark*,⁵⁰ argues that the early church fathers at least preferred Matthew's Gospel to Mark's. But, when perusing his evidences, clear indications show that they either did not have Mark or, in fact, ignored it. The idea of Markan priority is the product of liberal scholarship's denial of God's involvement in the authorship of Scripture. This is combined with an assumption of late dates (now disproved) and oral sources necessary to explain away the miraculous without the problem of eyewitnesses still being around to challenge pious myths.

The danger of accepting later dates for the Gospels is reflected in Linnemann's warnings about the danger of assumptions guiding interpretation. Such assumptions include such things as a "Gospel's theology and bias, as well as the nature of the community which it reflects."⁵¹ By moving the author to a different context, interpreters give meaning to the text based on imagined contexts that may or may not have existed and are not demonstrable. Accurate understanding becomes impossible.

Evangelicals have determined already that inerrancy does not permit pious fiction in the Gospels. But, any redactional approach that discusses Matthew's motives for changing Mark, has essentially accused Matthew of altering the truth. Why? We also believe that when Mark penned his Gospel on the basis of Peter's testimony, he did so inerrantly. Its original autograph was inspired. It was verbally and plerarily inerrant in matters of history and fact just as much as in faith and practice. And unless there is compelling literary evidence, falling back to *ipsisima vox* (i.e., the very voice) and allowing alteration is a denial of the author's evident intention that his readers understand it as *ipsisima verba* (i.e., the very words).

Matthew's Authorship and Inerrancy

⁴⁹Examples of the Markan-hypothesis advocacy can be seen in such scholarly works as: Frederick D. Bruner, *Matthew A Commentary*, vol. 1 (Dallas: Word, 1987) xvii; C. F. D. Moule, *The Birth of the New Testament*, 3rd rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982) 107-8; Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Matthew* (London: Elliot Stock, 1910) xi; John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976) 93-97. Examples also abound in "evangelical" works such as Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman, 1992) 41-46.

⁵⁰John M. Rist, *On the Independence of Matthew and Mark*, vol. 32, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series, ed. Matthew Black (London: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

⁵¹Linnemann, *Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology?* 93.

Denial of Matthew's authorship is disturbing and reflects what appears to stem from an unwillingness of some evangelical scholars to stand against the presuppositions of critical scholarship. When challenged, the answer is given: "Since the Gospel does not claim Matthean authorship, I do not have to hold to Matthew as the author."⁵² So who is the author of the Gospel? Was he a non-apostle from late in the first century?⁵³

Why is the apostle Matthew rejected? Evangelicals reject Matthew only because Markan priority is the accepted view of the academy, controlled by critical scholars, who continue to hold to it in the same way as those who continue to teach Darwinian evolution in the face of overwhelming data to the contrary. Since those reasons for rejecting him as author have proven spurious, we should ask why anyone should doubt Matthew's authorship, in light of the question such doubt raises about apostolic authority?

Testimony of the Church Fathers

David Farnell has produced an excellent description of the problem and an accounting of the evidence from the church fathers for Matthew's authorship of the Gospel bearing his name, as well as its priority in the order of writing.⁵⁴ He demonstrates convincingly that the testimony of the church fathers was "unanimous" that "Matthew was the first gospel written."⁵⁵ He also demonstrates that the early church fathers, legitimate scholars in their own right, identified the Gospel with the apostle Matthew (and not some later redactor) on the basis of widespread testimony and not isolated personal theories.⁵⁶ He aptly notes, "The universal ascription of the

⁵²This was the response given to me by a seminar leader at the Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Massachusetts, November of 2000.

⁵³The answer given me by the seminar leader.

⁵⁴F. David Farnell, "The Synoptic Gospels in the Ancient Church: The Testimony to the Priority of Matthew's Gospel," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 10/1 (Spring 1999):53-86. He notes well, "Apostolic origin of the gospels is vital for a canonical document that purports to be a record of Jesus' historical ministry on earth. The anonymity of the Matthean gospel argues strongly for the validity of tradition that attached Matthew's name to it, because such anonymity is inexplicable apart from its direct association with the apostle Matthew. Matthew was a relatively obscure figure among the Twelve, so no adequate reason exists to explain why the early church would have chosen his name rather than a better-known apostle if he had not indeed written it" (ibid., 62).

⁵⁵Ibid., 54.

⁵⁶The so-called existence of an Aramaic Matthew is not a problem since "early and consistent ascription of the Greek gospel to Matthew would indicate that the transfer of connection from Matthew's Aramaic version mentioned by Papias to the Greek gospel occurred at a very early stage well into the first century. Such a very early stage would have placed Greek Matthew into a period when people, such as surviving apostles, eyewitnesses, and others who possessed first-hand knowledge regarding the Gospel would have linked the Aramaic and Greek versions together as coming from the hand of Matthew" (ibid., 67). And, "[T]hough patristic witnesses like Papias uniformly spoke of an Aramaic original for the gospel, they accepted the Greek Matthew as unquestionably authoritative and coming from the Apostle

Greek Matthew to the Apostle Matthew and the failure of tradition to mention any other possible author except Matthew renders unconvincing any suggestion that the early church forgot the true author of the work.”⁵⁷ Better yet, “An analysis of data from the church fathers results in one conspicuous conclusion: they do not support either the Two-Document Hypothesis or the Two-Gospel Hypothesis. The assumed dependence of Matthew and Luke on Mark is totally without historical foundation, as is the assumed dependence of Mark on Matthew and Luke instead of on Peter’s preaching.”⁵⁸

So, why does “modern” scholarship reject or explain away the church fathers? It does so because of the growing “adherence to an assumed hypothesis of literary dependence, which is the basic assumption of Historical Criticism.” And what is Farnell’s solution with which I concur? “Instead of being outrightly rejected, explained, or enervated by a preconceived agenda or predilection toward a particular synoptic hypothesis, the statements of the fathers should have their full weight in any discussion of the synoptic issue.”⁵⁹

But more than the early church fathers speaks against Markan priority.

Evidence Against Literary Dependence

While it seems that more and more evangelicals are willing to accept the critical supposition of literary dependence between the synoptic Gospels, the data does not support the proposal. The works of Rist, Massaux, and Niemelä are just a small sampling.

Rist’s work, now over twenty years old, argues strongly against any literary dependence between the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, questioning the existence of Q, based both on the textual evidences and church fathers.⁶⁰ He describes well the attitude prevalent in liberal scholarship then, an attitude becoming increasingly obvious in so-called evangelical scholarship now. “We are confronted here with a not unfamiliar syndrome in scholarship: my result must be right; if my reasons for

Matthew himself.” Further, “all references to the Gospel of Matthew in the early church fathers reflect the Greek Matthew rather than the Hebrew” (ibid., 68).

⁵⁷Ibid., 69. Farnell is also accurate in saying, “The only adequate explanation for the gospel’s influence and overwhelming popularity in the early church is its apostolic authorship.” What is its significance in the higher critical debates on source? “Besides nullifying the Two- or Four-Source Theory’s view of Markan priority, Irenaeus’ testimony also negates literary dependence of Mark on Matthew as proposed by the Two-Gospel Hypothesis, because it states that Mark depended on Peter’s preaching, not on the other written gospels of Matthew or Luke, for his information” (ibid., 71). Further, there is the stark reality that “the early church fathers overwhelmingly neglected Mark,” which only makes sense if Matthew was all they had to work with from the beginning (ibid., 84).

⁵⁸Ibid., 84.

⁵⁹Ibid., 85.

⁶⁰Rist, *On the Independence of Matthew and Mark* 9.

subscribing to it are demonstrably false, I must hunt up some more.”⁶¹ Rejecting the presuppositions, where does Rist arrive? “In brief there is as yet no convincing evidence that Irenaeus was wrong when, perhaps paraphrasing or rewriting Papias, he declared that Matthew’s Gospel was written while Peter and Paul were gospelling in Rome and laying the foundations of the Church.”⁶² He also notes, “What the tradition says nothing about is any influence of Mark on Matthew or of Matthew on Mark. ... What the ancient traditions do in fact imply is that Matthew and Mark derive independently from apostolic witness.”⁶³ He concludes, “There is no evidence in the texts themselves which necessitates literary dependence of Mark on Matthew or of Matthew on Mark; and there is no evidence whatever in the early tradition to indicate that such dependence was thought to have existed.”⁶⁴

Edouard Massaux’s more recent work, *The Influence of the Gospel of Saint Matthew on Christian Literature before Saint Irenaeus*, challenges the assumption of Markan priority on the basis of its total neglect by the church fathers. Where they knew and quoted extensively from Matthew, Mark was ignored.⁶⁵ He also found that the use of Matthew included far more than the Sermon on the Mount and reflected a “literal dependence” such that it is evident that the church fathers were using a complete Gospel text and not just some separate tradition(s) or “edition of the Sermon on the Mount.”⁶⁶

Most recently John Niemelä has produced a dissertation debunking Markan priority and the need for a Q document by demonstrating through statistical analysis that Mark could *not* have been the basis of Matthew and Luke’s Gospels.⁶⁷ Though his assumption of some form of literary dependence leads him to conclude that Mark used Matthew and Luke, the evidence is more compelling that neither Mark nor Matthew used anybody.⁶⁸ But why is this so important?

⁶¹Ibid., 1.

⁶²Ibid., 7.

⁶³Ibid., 11.

⁶⁴Ibid., 106-7.

⁶⁵Edouard Massaux, *The Influence of the Gospel of Saint Matthew on Christian Literature before Saint Irenaeus*. Book 3. *The Apologists and the Didache*, trans. Norman J. Belal and Suzanne Hecht, ed., Arthur J. Bellinzoni (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University, 1993) 11-41, 90, 118, 125, 138, 183.

⁶⁶Ibid., 184.

⁶⁷John H. Niemelä, “The Infrequency of Twin Departures: An End to Synoptic Reversibility?,” Ph.D. Dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, Dallas, Tex., 2000. He argues from the practice of “secular writers” like Josephus who, using more than one source, followed an “alternating pattern of citation.” Using statistical analysis, he then shows that Mark’s Gospel can be demonstrated to be the product of utilizing a scroll of Matthew and a scroll of Luke as sources, while they could not have independently used Mark as one of their sources (108-10, 192).

⁶⁸Niemelä’s argument from his analysis of blocks of material, and recognition of verbal differences in those blocks that he determined were copied from Matthew or Luke by Mark, is that Mark used the other Gospels for his outline, but wrote in his own words. The differences in most blocks (and perhaps

Issue of Apostolic Authority

One of the key issues at stake is that of apostolic authority. Though some say it does not matter whether Matthew wrote the Gospel or not, it does matter, because ultimately Peter, Paul, and John all appealed to apostolic authority. John said he saw, heard, and handled embodied Eternal Life, Jesus (1 John 1:1-4). Peter's legitimacy grew out of his eyewitness relationship to Jesus' revelation (2 Pet 1:16-18). Likewise, a non-eyewitness, Paul based his authority on direct revelation from Christ (Gal 1:11-12).

An apostolic connection is important for the normative authority of the Word of God. To say that it is some other elder's writing from the late first century, utilizing and altering traditions passed down and modified over decades, makes it no more authoritative than the writings of any of the church fathers. Also, to say that it does not carry apostolic weight is to deny its authority as God's Word. The non-apostolic Gospels and epistles of the NT all had apostolic connections that resulted in their acceptance by the early church. And there is where the underlying attack to an adequate view of inspiration comes for those who say Matthew does not have to be the author of Matthew. The primacy of Matthew's Gospel over the others, based on the testimony of the early church fathers, came precisely because it *was* from the hand of an apostle and eyewitness. Mark's Gospel did not achieve a similar status and was largely ignored by the church fathers precisely because it was only based on an apostle's testimony and not from the hand of an apostle, and because it contributed essentially nothing new to Matthew's testimony. It may have been of help to the church in Rome, but the rest of the church fathers already had Matthew's Gospel and were obviously satisfied with that. The same can probably be said of Luke's Gospel, though it was quoted more than Mark. Though they were respected as authentic Gospels with intermediate apostolic connections, their intended audiences were much more limited. And as a result, so was their influence.

It is legitimate to say that three of the Gospels reflect eyewitness accounts; Mark is based on Peter's account of what he saw and heard. Their variation in wording reflects differing perspectives of events and memories of Jesus' statements. This is consistent with the veracity and viewpoint of eyewitnesses. It is altogether another thing to say Mark was written in Greek, and pseudo-Matthew took Mark and consciously altered the words of Jesus for theological purposes, knowing that Jesus did not really speak those words, but using the alteration to help him prove his point to his readers. This is no different from Gundry's claiming that Mark's stories were "embellished" by "Matthew" for theological purposes.

Departure from Inerrancy

every block) in Mark from Matthew and Luke should argue against block copying and argue for a separate source (Peter himself) who would have told the same story in his own words (*ibid.*, 125).

The use of redaction criticism, for which Markan priority is a normative assumption, necessarily *requires* that an unknown author other than Matthew, or even Matthew himself, modified the tradition and/or Mark's account in order to express his own theological views and address the problems of his own community, whatever the modern-day scholar determines that to be. It is in the area of the changes made by Matthew that the problem with inerrancy surfaces. Does inerrancy allow for Spirit-inspired changes? Is that consistent with our understanding of God's nature as a God of truth who does not lie? Article 12 of the "Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy" states in part, "We affirm that Scripture in its entirety is inerrant, being free from all falsehood, fraud, or deceit." How does it fit with the expectation that evangelicals will hold to an inerrant Scripture? It is the question of falsehood that must be addressed. If Matthew took some tradition and corrected it in accordance with his recollection of the event, guided by the Holy Spirit, we have no problem. But, if Matthew "corrected" Mark or took some other "tradition" and altered its message to suit his own purposes, and his changes did not happen nor were part and parcel with the meaning of what Jesus said, then a falsehood has been presented as truth by the Holy Spirit! Is this not exactly the point of all redaction-critical analysis and conclusions, especially those Matthean studies that assume Markan priority? Something was *consciously* changed!

But, then, how exact should we be in our definition of inerrancy? Is *ipsissima vox* enough? When addressing the issue of *His* view of Scripture, Jesus said that, "till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled" (Matt 5:18). For Him inspiration extended to the very letters of the text. Why? It was because those letters formed the very words, not just the ideas or sense of a passage. Those exact words were contained in historical narratives as well as prophetic writings. Also, since Peter equated Paul's epistles with "the rest of the Scriptures" (2 Pet 3:15-16) and Paul considered the Gospel of Luke to be Scripture when quoting Luke 10:7 in 1 Timothy 5:18, the NT documents are as equivalent in authority and inspiration as the Old. That being said, Jesus' equation must still stand. Thus we hold to verbal plenary inspiration in the original autographs. How does this impact the issue of *ipsissima vox*? *Vox* does not extend historical accuracy to the very words. *Vox* is not what Jesus meant in His view of the OT Scriptures. *Vox* should not be a sufficient evangelical view of the NT.

How does this impact the so-called evangelical use of redaction criticism? The *modus operandi* of redaction criticism lies in its purpose and presumptions, namely to discover and demonstrate an author's theology on the basis of changes he has made to the received "tradition," whether it is oral, Mark, Q, or some sayings source, reflected in the differences discovered in the synoptic texts. Every redactional study must of necessity argue for an authorial alteration of previously received information, whether from church tradition (arising from source criticism) or a prior Gospel account. Gundry gave us 585 pages of this and then admitted that he believed the author of Matthew produced intentional embellishments. Are evangelical redactionists qualitatively or just quantitatively different?

Conclusion

The anti-supernatural foundation and non-evangelical assumptions that form the basis of the denial of Matthew's priority and authorship must be recognized and avoided by evangelicals if they are to remain true to Scripture's inspiration and authority.⁶⁹ To permit this theological drift within evangelical churches, colleges, and seminaries poses a threat to the vitality and future of evangelicalism as witnessed in the decline of mainline denominations.⁷⁰

Eta Linnemann is correct in her warnings that evangelical adoption of critical methods, such as Redaction Criticism, ultimately leads to the same liberal conclusions, since those methods were designed to prove the evolutionary theory of religious development and deny divine inspiration. The danger arises from accepting the presuppositions of modern scholars and their theories in the face of the evidence of early church fathers whose testimonies can be trusted.

When science told us creation was impossible and the world was billions of years old, theologians came up with theistic evolution as their means of being accepted, at least in part, by the academy. Why? They were too cowardly to confess that God knew what He was talking about in Genesis 1–11. Even today, men like Hugh Ross try to tell us that we must interpret Genesis 1–11 consistent with their present understanding of the universe—what they perceive to be undeniable evidence based on their discipline's theories and interpretation of data.⁷¹ But does science really have the answers? Macro-evolution has been demonstrated to be absolutely impossible at the cell level by Michael Behe, who only put in writing what scientists knew for years and kept quiet about.⁷² Why? The academy, controlled by

⁶⁹I commend the definition of inspiration provided us by Louise I. Hodges ("Evangelical Definitions of Inspiration: Critiques and a Suggested Definition," *JETS* 37 [1994]:109). "Graphic (written) inspiration is the activity by which that portion intended by God of his special revelation was put into permanent, authoritative, written form by the supernatural agency of the Holy Spirit, who normally worked concurrently and confluent through the spontaneous thought processes, literary styles, and personalities of certain divine-selected men in such a way that the product of their special labors (in its entirety) is the very Word of God (both the ideas and the specific vocabulary), complete, infallible, and inerrant in the original manuscripts."

⁷⁰MacArthur speaks of this decline when writing, "By the early part of this century, most of the mainline Protestant denominations had embraced one form or another of Historical Criticism. And as they do so, one denomination after the other began the inevitable process of decay and decline. Today many of those denominations are mere shells of what they once were. Their churches, once bustling, are now lifeless and empty—monuments to skepticism, liberalism, and humanistic rationalism. The damning and destructive fruits of Historical Criticism were thus made manifest for all to see" (John MacArthur, "Foreword," in *The Jesus Crisis* 9).

⁷¹Hugh Ross, *Creation and Time: A Biblical and Scientific Perspective on the Creation Date Controversy* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1994); *The Genesis Question: Scientific Advances and the Accuracy of Genesis* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1998).

⁷²Michael J. Behe, *Darwin's Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

evolutionists, could not live with truth that completely invalidated their philosophical underpinnings, which were necessary to maintain a denial of God's existence. Are we not seeing the same thing happen in the area of biblical studies? Are not too many of our numbers adopting discredited theories, created by unbelievers in their rejection of God's revelation, and allowing them to degrade a correct handling of Scripture? How does God feel about this? Paul wrote, "O Timothy! Guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane and idle babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge—by professing it some have strayed concerning the faith" (1 Tim 6:20-21).

Whether from the pulpit or the classroom podium, evangelicals have an obligation to the body of Christ to strengthen its faith, which requires a strong view of the authority of Scripture. This obligation is to the man and woman in the pew. Redactional analyses NEVER strengthen the authority of the text. Redactionists try to make it sound like they are the only ones with a handle on the truth, and they lump dissenters with the common folk who do not know any better. That does not strengthen the authority of Scripture. Have evangelicals forgotten that their task as pastors and teachers comes with a mandate from our Lord to strengthen the faith of that man or woman sitting in the pew, "rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Tim 2:15), not being puffed up with what is falsely called knowledge?

Evangelicalism must return to its roots and recommit itself to a defense of God's Word against destructive outside influences. This is not just about Matthew and Mark. It is about what distinguishes evangelicals from the rest of the theological world in building up the body of Christ, not weakening its faith.