

Higher Criticism In Canada

Canada used to have a Christian moral consensus. Now it is living on Christian memories. The influence of the churches has become minimal. Secularism, confusion and pessimism have gained the upper-hand.

We cannot understand the widespread unbelief in Canada, our nation, without realizing the destructive work Higher Biblical Criticism has been doing for the last fifty years. The sharp edge of the Bible has been blunted in major theological faculties and seminaries. The sure message of God has been traded for the uncertain opinions of man. This heresy of Higher Biblical Criticism has not been challenged for the last quarter of a century in the councils and assemblies of the mainline denominations.

The influence of the new teaching was slow in reaching Canada. It did not arrive until the latter part of the nineteenth century. Canadian theologians were more activist than reflective. They were more concerned with the problems of church extension in a vast and thinly populated country, and the social issues resulting from the industrial revolution. They were generally speaking more derivative than creative and were influenced by higher criticism mainly through their contacts with Scotland and England. At the opening of the twentieth century the higher critics were eagerly studied in both universities and colleges. The critical approach to Scripture caused tension, and some divisions, but no man in the last fifty years has been removed from his pulpit or professorial chair because of this teaching.

A DEFINITION OF HIGHER CRITICISM

What is higher criticism? Higher criticism gives a changed approach to Scripture and a reconstructed doctrine of inspiration. The real problem in its deepest essence is whether we can still trust the Bible as an infallible guide for doctrine and life.

Higher criticism depends on the theory of evolution as the explanation of literature and religion. It holds that religion must have unfolded itself by the evolutionary process. In general, Biblical criticism can be described as the same type of rationalistic analysis that is applied to the works of Homer, Shakespeare, and all other great literature. The critics dissect the Old Testament, the gospels, and the epistles in the same manner as the classics. The acceptance of this approach meant the abandonment of the belief in the infallibility of Scripture. The Bible became a very human book, including a different understanding of God and His will for man, and including not only inspirational literature, historical documents, but also legends and myths. In short, the Bible, was no longer inerrant.

Ben Smillie, writing in the *United Church Observer* in 1967, gives a fair description of the higher critical view, which he holds as "true." He states: "If Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and Jonah are personages in myth and allegory, they cannot be historical people at the same time, no matter how sincere one's faith. Does somebody question this? Then look at the Bible documents. Any student who has done a basic course on

the Bible knows since the days of Karl Graf and Julius Wellhausen (two giants of Old Testament scholarship at the end of the nineteenth century) that the first six books of the Bible are composite literary works, containing myths, legends, law and priestly ritual. They are the product of numerous writers and through minute examination of their writing style, four main strands or codes have been traced. In most cases these different writings are as identifiable as a person's fingerprints. There is the Javist or "J" code, written between 900-500 B.C., the key being the use of the word Jehovah for God; there is the Elohist or "E" code, written between 850-700 B.C., where the word "Elohim" is used for God; there is the Deuteronomic or "D" code, 621-350 B.C.; and finally the priestly or "P" code, 420-250 B.C. Each of these four major documents represents a school of theological thought and literary composition extending over several centuries. To deny this information about the Bible is to fly in the face of facts about the Bible; it is as bad churchmen in the early sixteenth century trying to dismiss Copernicus because he said the sun, not the earth, was the center of the universe" (U.C.O., May 15, 1967).

Ben Smillie's position destroys the work and relevance of the church. As a higher critic he removes the heart from the church and the basis for truth.

ENGLISH, SCOTCH, AND GERMAN BACKGROUND OF HIGHER CRITICISM

Two prominent scholars introduced Canadian theologians to and instructed them in this new approach to Scripture.

1. William Robertson Smith (1846-1894) - Dr. Smith was a brilliant scholar who became Professor of Oriental languages and Old Testament exegesis at the Free Church College of Aberdeen, Scotland. He wrote a series of articles for the Encyclopedia Britannica that aroused strong opposition from the authorities of the Free Church. In his articles and books he expressed German higher critical views to which he had been introduced while studying at Bonn and Gottingen. In 1881, the assembly, after a lengthy trial, gave him a no-confidence vote as professor and he was removed from his professional chair.

Dr. Smith, influenced by evolutionary concepts in science and historical development, challenged the historic Reformed view of Scripture. He attacked the validity of the Old Testament canon. He sought to demonstrate that the Psalms were written after the days of Malachi, and even as late as the Maccabees, and that therefore the compilation date was long after the ceasing of Old Testament inspiration. He had adopted the German theory that the Levitical details of sacrifice and ritual were never legislated until in or after the days of Ezekiel. He asserted that Jeremiah knew nothing of a Levitical code of sacrifice and that none such existed in his day.

2. Samuel Rolles Driver (1846-1914) - Dr. Driver was an English Semitic language scholar, co-editor of the *Oxford Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (1906). He had an important part in communicating the Higher Critical approach to the Old Testament. He wrote one of the most important works on this subject in the English speaking world. This book, still widely used in successive editions to this day, was his

Introduction to the *Literature of the Old Testament* (1891, 1913-9th edition) in the International *Theological Series*. It exercised great influence among the younger scholars during the last part of the nineteenth and in the early years of this century.

3. The German Influence - Smith and Driver were spokesmen for their German professors. Theological leadership was centered in Germany throughout the nineteenth century. The "science" of higher criticism originated there and spread to Holland, France, England, U.S, and Canada. This new approach to the Bible came to characterize liberal Protestantism. (An excellent discussion on the development of Higher Criticism is Robert L. Dabney's *The Influence of the German University System on Theological Literature. Discussions: Evangelical and Theological*. Vol. I, pp. 440-465.)

LEADING CANADIAN SCHOOLS OF HIGHER CRITICISM

1. Queen's University (Presbyterian), Kingston, Ontario

- The first school that committed itself to higher criticism was Queen's under the leadership of Dr. W. G. Gordon and with the support of Principal Grant. Dr. George Monro Grant, who was for awhile minister of St. Matthew's Church in Halifax, N.S., said to have been the most influential Presbyterian churchman in Canada in his day, defended the German higher critic Wellhausen. In 1866, Grant preached a sermon in which he assailed the "extreme" confessionalism of all the churches and held that it took the attitude: "Abandon thought, all ye who enter here!"

Philosophical idealism was emphasized in the undergraduate courses and students were introduced to the latest developments in German Biblical criticism.

2. Victoria University (Methodist), Toronto, Ontario

– The Methodists founded the Upper Canada Academy in 1836. In 1841 it became Victoria College, later Victoria University. Dr. George Workman, professor at this school of higher learning, said "that no scholar of repute today accepts the dictation theory of inspiration." Through the efforts of the General Superintendent of the Methodist Church, Dr. Albert Carman, he was forced to retire from his professional chair in 1899. He was invited to become a member of the teaching staff of the Wesleyan College but was dismissed in 1907 because of his views. Despite these dismissals and the disapproval of the church, Dr. Workman's approach to Scriptures continued to have wide influence.

This combination of Biblical criticism and a strong leaning towards universalism led to the eroding of missionary zeal and activity. Dr. John Webster Grant comments: "Those who sought to save the heathen from a literal hell might well conclude that the new theology and the new methodology were equally designed to cut the nerve of missionary motivation" (p. 62 *The Church in the Canadian Era*). A new generation of teachers, especially at universities and arts colleges, regarded it as an important part of their work to help students come to terms with Biblical criticism and Darwinianism

without abandoning their faith. The theological colleges offered greater resistance to change, but by the end of the nineteenth century they had in general ceased to withstand "the new scholarship."

CRITIQUE

Higher critics have claimed that modern scholarship led them to their conclusions. "Objective analysis" drove them to seriously question the stories of creation, the history of the Hebrews as well as the events surrounding the life of Christ, the apostles and the early church. The critics have analyzed but not objectively. Their conclusions were dictated by philosophical presuppositions. We don't have a quarrel with the historical method, but with the basic presuppositions. Since the latter are faulty, the conclusions are wrong.

1. Rationalism

- Higher criticism is based upon the idea, as Renan expressed it, that reason is capable of judging all things, but itself is judged by nothing. It springs from a philosophical background that is based on the assumption of human self-sufficiency. Man is autonomous. He alone is the judge of what is true and right. But when you make the doctrine of Scripture dependent on your "objective analysis" you have already begun to deny the witness of Scripture itself. You no longer base your faith and reason upon Scripture, but on your own judgment. You place your own thoughts above Scripture. You judge Scripture instead of Scripture judging you. Higher criticism has made the Bible subject to man himself. The authority of the Bible has been replaced by or subordinated to that of reason and of feelings.

Textual difficulties have always been recognized by the historic Reformed faith. Yet it always believed that every word of Scripture without exception is the Word of God. The Bible is not a human product. It is God's own Word for all times and every sphere of life. Reason is not independent. It must submit itself to that Word. There are things in the Bible we don't understand and are mysterious to us. Yet we accept its claim to be God's own word – to be submitted to and studied. No man can have an autonomous place over against Scripture. Higher critics have tried that but failed. God is the judge of man and not man the judge of the mind of God.

2. Rebellion

- Higher critics are in rebellion against Christ. When you have been raised from spiritual death to life you are able to accept the Bible as God's infallible Word. Dr. Cameron, a Canadian evangelical, Dr. Herman Bavinck and Dr. Cornelius Van Til bring out this point. Dr. Cameron says of higher criticism: "No one who has studied the attacks made by the German critics during the last half century upon the authority and reliability of the Old Testament Scriptures, can be ignorant of the fact that the real object of hostility has been our Lord Jesus." Dr. Bavinck writes: "Because it is the inscripturation of the revelation of God in Christ, it must arouse the same opposition as Christ himself." Dr.

Van Til remarks: "Basic to an understanding of the whole attack on Scripture is the fact that the natural man hates Christ and therefore hates Christ's Word as it makes its claims upon him in Scripture."

The natural mind cannot discern the things of the Spirit. It is in rebellion against God and His revelation.

Canadian church leaders are calling for a renewal of faith, as they see our society in crisis. Renewal will come when the Bible is preached as the Word of God from the pulpits, when the Scriptures are received with the same reverence as is given to God, when churches bow before the infallible Word given to us by the infinite, personal God. The Bible has a message for our nation and binds God's people to the living Lord in heaven. The Bible is God's living Word, God's power Word for His creation.

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