

**A COMPARATIVE STUDY  
OF VARYING CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES  
TO BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION**

**A Report of the  
Commission on Theology and Church Relations  
The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod  
March 1973**

**A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF  
VARYING CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO BIBLICAL  
INTERPRETATION**

**Preface**

In Christendom today a major controversy centers around questions pertaining to the origin, nature, interpretation, and authority of the Sacred Scriptures. The entire substance of the controversy can be reduced without remainder to the way that participants in the debate answer four questions about the Bible, namely:

- I. How did the Bible get here?
- II. What kind of book is the Bible?
- III. What method is most suitable for interpreting the Bible?
- IV. What is the proper use of the Bible?

For more than eighteen centuries the Christian Church answered all of these questions in a manner sufficiently consistent to make it possible to speak of a clearly identifiable traditional position, a position that many call the “historical-grammatical” view. The development of modern historical science has seriously challenged the traditional position.

A radically historical-critical approach to the study of the origin and nature of the Biblical literature rejected age-old conceptions about how the Bible got here and what kind of a book it is, and consequently changed drastically former methods of interpreting the Bible and former ideas about the way the Bible should be used.

Gradually but progressively the persuasive appeal of historical reasoning caused even those who still hold that the Bible is God’s Word to adopt in varying degrees the hypotheses of the historical-critical view and to attempt to work out a synthesis of the historical-grammatical (traditional) and the radically historical approach to Biblical studies which might seem to hold the two together in a workable and constructive tension. This may be termed the mediating historical-critical position.

This document is herewith offered to the church in response to Resolution 2-52 of the 1971 convention in the hope that it will clarify some of the issues involved in our current discussions. It attempts to explain how the historical-grammatical (traditional), the radically historical-critical, and the mediating historical-critical positions answer the four questions at the heart of the debate about the Bible.

The material in each column is only intended to provide a general profile of a distinguishable point of view. It should therefore be understood that the statements in the three columns are not always mutually exclusive, nor do the views of all contemporary interpreters always fit precisely and consistently into one or the other column. The reader should also note that the materials in the three columns have not been arranged in such a way that every paragraph in one column is correlated with a corresponding paragraph in the other columns. For that reason, it may be helpful to read each column individually (vertically) before comparing it with the other columns (horizontally).

\* \* \* \* \*

List of Abbreviations

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| AC – Augsburg Confession                       | CTCR <u>Stance</u> – “A Lutheran Stance Toward Contemporary Biblical Studies”, a study document produced by the CTCR in 1967 |
| Ap – Apology of the Augsburg Confession        |  |
| SC – Small Catechism                           | CTCR <u>Revelation</u> – “Revelation, Inspiration, and Inerrancy”, a study document produced by the CTCR in 1965             |
| LC – Large Catechism                           |  |
| SA – Smalcald Articles                         |  |
| FC, Ep – Formula of Concord, Epitome           |  |
| FC, SD – Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration |  |

Note: All citations from the Lutheran Confessions are taken from The Book of Concord, edited by T. G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969)

## I. HOW DID THE BIBLE GET HERE?

The Historical-Grammatical (Traditional) View	The Historical-Critical View	
	The Radical Position	The Mediating Position
<p>1. Lutheran Confessional theology teaches that God has given men a revelation of Himself in His works of creation. The self-disclosure of God in the realm of nature is called “general revelation.” The revelation of God in nature is finally a <u>law</u> revelation.</p> <p>a. Ever since the entrance of sin into the world, the whole creation groans under the bondage of corruption (Rom. 8:19ff.). Our whole physical environment witnesses to the judgement of God who visits <u>death</u> on the works of His own hands because of man’s rebellion against His maker.</p> <p>b. Since general revelation does not witness to the grace that pardons but only to the wrath that punishes sin, the sinner responds to the revelation of God in nature by willfully suppressing the truth to which it witnesses (Rom. 1:18). He either denies that there is a God (Ps. 14:1; 53:1) or he invents an idol whose wrath can be appeased by human devices (LC, I, 18-23).</p> <p>2. The revelation in which God makes Himself known as a <u>gracious</u> God is called “special revelation.” While special revelation cannot simply be equated with Holy Scriptures, since God spoke to His people in many ways even before any Scriptures were written, and has spoken to us in these last times especially in His Son (Heb. 1:1-2), it is nevertheless true that it is in the Scriptures that the knowledge of these special revelations of God’s mercy has come to us. The Scriptures are, therefore, included among the revelations of Himself that God has given us for our salvation.</p>	<p>1. The historian, <u>qua</u> historian, must investigate and attempt to explain the origin of the Bible in the same way that he accounts for any other historical phenomenon.</p> <p>2. The tools of the historian’s craft are forged to deal only with the <u>human</u> aspects of the Bible. The historian can neither deny nor affirm a <u>supernatural</u> dimension of historical phenomena since the supernatural is not amenable to investigation by the procedures of his discipline. The historian therefore limits his studies to those aspects of the Bible which can be investigated by his method.</p>	<p>1. The mediating view of the Bible’s origin takes seriously the “human side” of the biblical literature and regards the Bible to be the product of a history <u>open to investigation</u> by the world. It acknowledges in general the validity of the radical historian’s method of studying the genesis of the Scriptures.</p> <p>2. The mediating view of the Bible’s origin affirms also that for the Church of all ages, the Bible is <u>Holy</u> Scripture. Though the Bible participates in the history that produced it, in <u>this</u> history God was active in a unique way so that through the eyes of <u>faith</u> there is a dimension to Biblical literature beyond that which is discernible by historiographical research. The historical dimension of the Bible in no way detracts from its divine dimension.</p>

The Historical-Grammatical (Traditional) View	The Historical-Critical View	
<p>3. The revelation given to us in the Scriptures about all that God has done in human history to effect our salvation <u>comes from</u> God. No prophetic teaching about what God was doing through His people to keep His promise of sending a Redeemer arose from any mere human reflection on an interpretation of Israel's history. But men spoke <u>from God</u> about these things as they were moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:20-21).</p> <p>Apostolic proclamation concerning all that God did in Christ was "revealed . . . through the Spirit" and imparted "in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit" (I Cor. 2:10, 13; Gal. 1:11-12). "All Scripture is inspired by God" (II Tim. 3:16).</p> <p>4. Scriptures inspired by God were written by <u>men</u>. God gave His Word to His Old and New Testament people through human beings whom He Himself chose and endowed to speak His Word to concrete situations and circumstances in the history of His people.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>The Radical Position</b></p> <p>3. In the absence of any direct external evidence relative to the origin of the Bible, the historian turns his attention to <u>internal</u> evidence. On the basis of data gathered by means of elaborate literary analyses, theories are constructed which account for the biblical literature wholly in terms of processes analogous to those which account for the production of other similar, non-Biblical literature.</p> <p>4. The following theory is proposed to explain the origin and characteristics of the Gospels:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Over a protracted period of time, a <u>series</u> of situations and the various <u>specific</u> interests of the early Christian communities in different localities gave rise to separate traditions about the deeds and teachings of the central figure of their cult.</li> <li>b. Later editors combined these disparate traditions in a continuous narrative form.</li> <li>c. Thus the Gospel are composites of various independent units which each editor selected and adapted to suit his particular purpose.</li> </ol> <p>5. The existence of the Bible is explainable wholly in terms of the operation of ordinary historical processes, completely without need to refer to any kind of supernatural, divine authority.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>The Mediating Position</b></p> <p>3. According to this position, the Bible came into being by a special divine operation in the ordinary course of the history that produced the biblical literature. The Holy Spirit influenced the whole process, from the formation of the earliest oral traditions to the final draft of the redactors (editors). This connection between the Spirit and history extends over the entire range of steps by which the biblical literature was produced, so that the divine control over the earliest stages of the development is the same in kind as the divine control of prophets and apostles at the "moment" of their inspired writing. The mediating view frequently stresses the inspiration of the <u>community</u> in order to include the whole process.</p> <p>4. The Bible got here by divine impetus and control over the whole history of the formation and composition of its literature. This history <u>per se</u> is completely analogous to the history of any literature. It is equally susceptible of investigation and description by the canons and techniques of the secular historian.</p>

## II. WHAT KIND OF A BOOK IS THE BIBLE?

The Historical-Grammatical (Traditional) View	The Historical-Critical View	
	The Radical Position	The Mediating Position
<p>The Bible, inspired by God and written by men, is a divine-human book. However, this is not to say that these are two parts which can be separated. The divine and the human in the Bible are combined in an inseparable union analogous to the union of the two natures in the Person of Christ.</p>	<p>The radically historical view answers this question in a manner consistent with its theory about the Bible's origin.</p>	<p>The rigid consistency which marks the radically historical view of the Bible is not a characteristic of the mediating position.</p>
<p>1. <u>A book written by men</u></p> <p>Lutherans acknowledge and teach that the Bible, even though it is and transmits God's very own Word, is a thoroughly human book. They do not have a docetic view of the Bible. (Note: The docetists were a heretical group in the ancient church who denied the true humanity of Jesus. They held that He only appeared to be human.)</p> <p>a. One obviously human aspect of the Sacred Scriptures is that the language of the Bible is <u>human language</u>, written to be read and understood by human beings. Accordingly, the Bible's language conforms to the usual principles of grammar and syntax. The biblical literature contains many of the literary forms and devices used by other literature for the purpose of effective communication.</p> <p>b. The Bible, considered as written communication, is human also in that it has a <u>history</u>.</p> <p>(1) In a sense, the biblical literature represents a "development." The Bible did not fall full-blown from heaven, but grew upon earth. The biblical literature came into existence over a period of many centuries. It was written <u>by human</u></p>	<p>1. <u>A human book</u></p> <p>a. When supernatural intervention in human affairs is denied (or at least considered a factor which the historian is not able to reckon with because it is in principle uninvestigable by methods of scientific research), then the Bible has to be regarded as the product of purely <u>human</u> thought and experience.</p> <p>b. In a product of human thought and experience, no eternal and immutable truth is to be found. In literature containing merely <u>human</u> reflection on such lofty themes as God and His relation to man and history, there are bound to be radically variant viewpoints. This is all the more true of literature that comes from different periods of history and that attempts to discuss such themes in a manner that is relevant and relative to widely differing cultures.</p> <p>c. Those who accept the radical view of the Bible's origin forfeit from the outset any right to expect to find even a <u>core</u> of truth in it.</p> <p>(1) In the Bible there is to be found only one layer upon another of historically conditioned human opinion.</p>	<p>1. <u>A human book</u></p> <p>The mediating position frequently disclaims any presuppositions deriving from the emphasis on the historical dimension of the Bible.</p> <p>a. For instance, when this position speaks of "differences" and "variety" in the Bible, it insists that it does so not because of any <u>presuppositions</u> about what <u>must</u> be in the Bible by virtue of its historical nature, but because such things are simply found in the text and cannot be evaded by anyone engaged in serious inductive study of the Scriptures.</p> <p>b. The fact that the Bible participates in human frailty is not to be regarded as a "presupposition" with which the Bible is approached, but as a "conclusion" resulting from the sheer weight of the evidence discovered at the "data gathering" stage of critical study. Whether called a "presupposition" or a "conclusion", the end result is the same.</p>

The Historical-Grammatical (Traditional) View	The Historical-Critical View	
<p>beings <u>for</u> human beings who lived in vastly varying cultures and conditions, but the message remains the same.</p> <p>(2) Inasmuch as the Bible was written in history by authors who were not insulated from the culture in which they lived and wrote, and inasmuch as its literature was not produced in a vacuum but was originally composed for and addressed to distinctively discreet situations and circumstances, this literature has a historical dimension that gives it <u>its own peculiar and concrete particularity</u>. In this sense, it is time-bound and culture-conditioned as is every product of the human mind and spirit. (Note: For example, the situation in Corinth which occasioned Paul's correspondence with the congregation there, had no precise parallel in any other congregation in apostolic times. If that particular situation had not obtained, Paul's letters to the Corinthians might not have been written at all, or, at least, they would have had a different complexion.)</p> <p>2. <u>A book inspired by God</u></p> <p>Lutherans, however, also teach that the Bible is a <u>divine</u> book.</p> <p>a. While Lutherans recognize that the Bible as an historical phenomenon is open to investigation by the historian, they believe and confess that there is a not-of-this-world dimension to the Sacred Scriptures, not discernible by historical research. Lutherans, therefore, do not surrender the Bible to the historian as though he could by his methods give a full account of the</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>The Radical Position</b></p> <p>(2) Any attempt to penetrate all the culturally relative accretions to find some kernel that remains true through all the time-bound interpretations is like peeling an onion. When one layer after another is removed, there is finally nothing left.</p> <p>d. It is claimed that when the full implications of the Bible's historical dimension are understood, it is quite beside the point to ask whether its viewpoints are true or false, for they were the only ones <u>possible</u> in the historical context from which they derive.</p> <p>e. It is equally out of keeping with the Bible's historical dimension to expect uniformity of viewpoints, since each of the units of tradition finally incorporated into the Scriptures reflects the perspective of those who transmitted it orally or committed it to writing.</p> <p>2. <u>A book about God</u></p> <p>a. From the radical standpoint it is impossible to regard the Bible as God's Word about Himself and His creatures. Much less is the Bible a revelation of divine wrath and mercy in which we expect to hear God speak to us in judgment and grace.</p> <p>b. The Bible belongs to the history of ancient Near Eastern religious literature in general in which we hear nothing but human beings from long ago and far away expressing</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>The Mediating Position</b></p> <p>2. <u>"Holy" Scripture</u></p> <p>The mediating view freely affirms that the <u>theological</u> element in its explanation of the genesis of the biblical literature necessitates certain presuppositions, namely:</p> <p>a. Because of the Holy Spirit's connection with the history that produced the Bible, the Bible is <u>Holy</u> Scripture. From the new perspective bestowed by the Holy Spirit through Baptism, the <u>Christian</u> student of the Bible has a reverent attitude toward these</p>

The Historical-Grammatical (Traditional) View	The Historical-Critical View	
<p>origin and nature of the biblical literature.</p> <p>b. Lutherans will not admit that the historian has the last word to say about the kind of a book the Bible is. They will not permit the historian to rule that the Bible is the product of precisely the same processes that produce other literature.</p> <p>c. Lutherans believe that in the history which occasioned the writing of the biblical literature God was active in a unique way, so that there is a “qualitative difference” between the inspired Scriptures and “every other form of human expression” (CTCR <u>Stance</u>, p. 10, par. 5).</p> <p>3. <u>A perfect unity</u></p> <p>Since <u>God</u> is their primary Author, the Scriptures differ qualitatively from other literature in that they possess such attributes as unity and inerrancy.</p> <p>a. Lutheran theology has always acknowledged that there is a certain progression discernible in the revelation that God gave of Himself and of His saving actions in history when earlier Scriptures are compared with later Scriptures (as when the Old Testament is compared with the New Testament.)</p> <p>b. Lutheran theology also acknowledges that there are in the Scriptures no conflicting or contradictory conceptions of God and His ways with men, but rather a perfect theological unity.</p> <p>c. For Lutheran theology it is a self-evident truth that God’s revelation of Himself in the Sacred Scriptures, though varying in fullness from age to age, is always perfectly consistent with itself.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>The Radical Position</b></p> <p>their world-picture and view of human existence in mythological language. The Bible is the kind of a book in which human beings from many different backgrounds tried to express in the language of mythology their understanding of human existence and of man’s place in the total scheme of things. They tried to express in the categories of their time what the total scheme of things is.</p> <p>c. The Bible is a useful resource for the study of ancient religious and philosophical speculation, but it is of no use as a source of knowledge about the transcendent or as an authority on human history.</p> <p>3. <u>Diversity, contradiction, and error</u></p> <p>In substance as well as in details, the Scriptures contain the same degree of diversity, contradiction, and error that one expects to find in all ancient historical documents.</p> <p>a. Lutheran theology has always acknowledged that there is a certain progression discernible in the revelation that God gave of Himself and of His saving actions in history when earlier Scriptures are compared with later Scriptures (as when the Old Testament is compared with the New Testament.)</p> <p>b. Lutheran theology also acknowledges that there are in the Scriptures no conflicting or contradictory conceptions of God and His ways with men, but rather a perfect theological unity.</p> <p>c. For Lutheran theology it is a self-evident truth that God’s revelation of Himself in the Sacred Scriptures, though varying in fullness from age to age, is always perfectly consistent with itself.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>The Mediating Position</b></p> <p>sacred writings. He expects to hear <u>God</u> address him in both judgment and mercy through the Biblical Word.</p> <p>b. There is a very real sense in which the Bible transcends the history from which it emerged. The Christian interpreter must continually take into account that the Scriptures, precisely in their historical character, are <u>Holy</u> Scriptures since they are the product of the Spirit who produces in history that which is <u>not of this world</u>.</p> <p>c. Faith approaches the Bible persuaded of its “not-of-this-world” character and regards the biblical writings as the Scriptures of God.</p> <p>3. <u>Unity of witness</u></p> <p>“Unity” may not be ascribed to the Scriptures in the same way this was done in former “uncritical” ages. One may speak of the Bible’s unity at the level of its witness to God’s judgment and mercy, but not at the level of agreement in all its teachings.</p>

The Historical-Grammatical (Traditional) View	The Historical-Critical View	
<p>4. <u>An inerrant book</u></p> <p>Another qualitative difference between the Scriptures and other literature is that the Scriptures are inerrant.</p> <p>a. The Lutheran Symbols make a sharp distinction between the Scriptures and “human being’s writings” (FC, SD, Summary, 9) and clearly affirm that the weaknesses which characterize human writings are not found in the Scriptures (Ap, XXIV, 94-95).</p> <p>b. The Lutheran Symbols confess the inerrancy of the Scriptures with simple and forceful words: “They will not lie to you” (LC, V, 76; cf. also FC, Ep, VIII, 13, and LC, IV, 57). “These words of the Scriptures are inerrant because they are inspired by God—words taught by the Holy Spirit, written by men moved by the Holy Spirit” (CTCR, <u>Revelation</u>, p. 4, par. 2).</p>	<p><b>The Radical Position</b></p>	<p><b>The Mediating Position</b></p> <p>4. <u>An errant book</u></p> <p>While the Scriptures from the theological perspective are “not-of-this-world”, historically considered they still <u>are</u> “of-this-world.” Hence, every aspect of their history is open to investigation by secular historians. Thus, the Scriptures bear the marks of their history also in terms of what the critical eye discerns as faults.</p> <p>a. One may still speak of inerrancy, but not on the level of errorless biblical statements about history and nature, for inerrancy pertains exclusively to the biblical witness concerning sin and grace through which God calls mankind to salvation.</p> <p>b. “Inerrancy” is sometimes defined to mean that the Bible, although it is historically conditioned, nevertheless is the kind of book that calls men to faith and newness of life through its manifold witness to God’s redemptive purposes in human history. In this view, “inerrancy” does not mean that the Bible is the kind of book in which there is perfect agreement in all its teachings and inerrant information concerning all matters of which it speaks.</p>

### III. WHICH METHOD IS MOST SUITABLE FOR INTERPRETING THE BIBLE?

The Historical-Grammatical (Traditional) View	The Historical-Critical View	
<p>Lutheran theology has always recognized that because the Bible is written in human language, certain general principles of interpretation must be observed. Lutheran theology also recognizes that because the</p>	<p><b>The Radical Position</b></p> <p>The methods for interpreting the Bible are typical of those employed for all ancient human literature.</p>	<p><b>The Mediating Position</b></p> <p>The mediating position employs a method of biblical interpretation which reflects its conclusions about the kind of a book the Bible is. Basically, the method thought best suited to Bible study operates with two broad canons: 1) In view of its</p>

The Historical-Grammatical (Traditional) View	The Historical-Critical View	
<p>Bible is God’s Word, certain other principles are basic to a correct understanding of its message.</p> <p><u>A human book: General principles</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Because the Bible communicates God’s eternal truth in literature, written by men in human idiom, and comprises literary forms common to other human literature, it is self-evident that biblical interpretation requires <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. A thorough knowledge of the languages in which the Bible was originally written;</li> <li>b. Acquaintance with and recognition of the literary forms employed by biblical authors for effective communication (address, oracle, prayer, creed, hymn, proverb, parable, historical narrative, edict, treaty, prose and poetry).</li> </ol> </li> <li>2. Because the biblical literature dates from various periods of human history and was addressed to concrete situations characterized by the particularity peculiar to everything that is historical, biblical interpretation needs to take this “historical dimension” of the Bible into account. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. The biblical literature cannot be treated as though every book and pericope was addressed to general situations, and as though everything that is said in every pericope is applicable immediately to <u>every</u> situation. (Note: For example, concerning the Third Commandment, Luther said: “Therefore, according to its literal outward sense, this commandment does not concern us Christians” (LC,</li> </ol> </li> </ol>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>The Radical Position</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The historian <u>qua</u> historian does not view the Bible from the perspective of the mind and Spirit of God, but takes it to be the product of human thought and experience.</li> <li>2. The historian, therefore, accounts for <u>what</u> the Bible says and the <u>way</u> it says it only in terms of the <u>historical</u> context that shaped the minds of its human authors. He does not reckon at all with the idea of a supernatural revelation or inspiration. The meaning of the biblical literature is to be sought exclusively in the historical factors which were the occasion (or occasions) of its production—factors that elicited the literature and factors that inescapably influenced both the form and content of the literature.</li> </ol>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>The Mediating Position</b></p> <p>historical dimension, the Bible must be studied by the same techniques used to study any other literature; 2) In view of its theological dimension, the Bible must be studied with the expectation to hear Law and Gospel.</p> <p><u>Historical Dimension</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Even though faith recognizes a “not-of-this-world” (theological) dimension of biblical literature, an inductive study of this literature leads to the conclusion that it also has a <u>historical</u> dimension, not only in the sense that it was produced <u>in</u> history, but that it was produced by history and <u>has</u> a history. Therefore it participates in the limitations of all human attempts to discuss themes such as those to which the Bible addresses itself. This “conclusion” then becomes a “presupposition” for interpretation of the Bible, and has a direct bearing on the method which is chosen as most suitable to study that kind of book.</li> <li>2. The historical approach embraces some very complex procedures: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Accepting the basic traditional hermeneutical principles as simple truisms applicable to the interpretation of any writing, this canon prescribes in addition that the biblical literature must be interpreted in its <u>total</u> historical and cultural context.</li> <li>b. This means that the interpreter must take into account not only the historical situation <u>to</u> which the biblical literature is addressed, but also the historical situation <u>which</u> produced it and accounts for what is said and <u>why</u> it said it that way.</li> </ol> </li> </ol>

The Historical-Grammatical (Traditional) View	The Historical-Critical View	
<p>I, 82). For a discussion of the specific application of specific texts to specific situations, see the Apology's treatment of Matt. 19:21 in Ap, XXVII, 45-50).</p> <p>b. The interpreter will therefore want to understand</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1) What the <u>original</u> situation was to which the words were first spoken;</li> <li>(2) What the words meant in that <u>particular</u> historical context;</li> <li>(3) What their <u>continuing</u> meaning is for subsequent times and circumstances.</li> </ol> <p>c. Lutheran theology, therefore, gratefully uses all the information made available by historical and archaeological research relative to the history of Israel and of all the other nations whose history touches Israel's. Lutheran theology gratefully uses the gains of New Testament scholarship which broaden and deepen our understanding of the apostolic writings.</p> <p>d. When Lutherans say that Scripture interprets itself, this is not to be understood as though historical research has no value for illumining the meaning of a biblical text.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>The Radical Position</b></p> <p>3. Accordingly, when a biblical author uses the form of historical narrative, for instance, at least three possibilities must be kept in mind by a twentieth century interpreter:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Ancient authors frequently used this form without intending to relate actual history;</li> <li>b. Even if the author intended to relate history, his conception of what is historical differs from ours, so</li> </ol>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>The Mediating Position</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>c. At this point the radical position is adopted which maintains that biblical literature is so completely conditioned by the culture which produced it that apart from a thorough acquaintance with the categories, thought patterns, and literary genres of the period from which it came, this literature cannot be understood at all.</li> <li>d. The interpreter assumes that in the biblical literature ancient writers were attempting to express a theological view of the world and history and of men and things in terms derived from and relative to <u>their</u> culture. The interpreter dare not begin to read what they wrote as though it were a straightforward statement of facts to be taken at its surface meaning. If he does, he has completely misunderstood both the meaning and the purpose of this literature.</li> </ol>

The Historical-Grammatical (Traditional) View	The Historical-Critical View	
	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>The Radical Position</b></p> <p>that his accounts easily introduce supernatural intervention in order to explain events and also otherwise lack the critical precision of present day history writing;</p> <p>c. His understanding of things he reports is perspectival, his report is colored by his antiquated world view, and his account is distorted by all sorts of subjective elements (such as superstition, religious beliefs, nationalistic bias, or hero worship).</p> <p>4. The interpreter's task becomes extremely complex. He must know the <u>author</u> equally as well as his writing if the author is to be understood on his own terms.</p> <p>a. The interpreter must ascertain whether the author wrote within an Eastern or Western frame of reference; whether he lived in, say the eighth century B.C. or the first century A.D.; whether the strands of tradition he used as sources for his own literature represent consistent or conflicting viewpoints; whether in selecting his material and embodying it in his own production, he did not in fact modify it significantly to suit his own bias.</p> <p>b. When the interpreter has sorted out all these things, he must make a decision as to the extent that the author's milieu affected not only <u>what</u> he said but the <u>way</u> he said it (that is, both content and form). His purpose is to determine not only what the author basically intended to say, but also to venture a hypothetical reconstruction of the probable course of events on the basis of a twentieth century understanding of history.</p> <p>c. Thus, the interpreter who applies historical reasoning to the Bible is at the same time a literary, form,</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>The Mediating Position</b></p>

The Historical-Grammatical (Traditional) View	The Historical-Critical View	
<p><b>Inspired by God: Other Principles</b></p> <p>While Lutheran students of the Bible gladly avail themselves of any light that historical research can shed on the Bible as a historical phenomenon, they never forget that the Bible is at the same time God’s eternal, immutable Word given to us by inspiration of God to make us wise unto salvation.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Viewing the Bible in this way leads Lutherans to emphasize the following as they interpret the Scriptures: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. The divine and saving wisdom which the Bible imparts can be understood and believed only as the Holy Spirit graciously empowers us to hear what God is speaking to us in His Word.</li> <li>b. In His Word God speaks to us His Law and Gospel, the Word that condemns and the Word that forgives. These must be carefully distinguished lest the Law be diluted and the Gospel perverted so that we receive from the Scriptures neither the knowledge of sin nor the assurance of grace.</li> <li>c. The central message of the Bible is the Gospel of God’s free grace toward sinners in Christ Jesus – the Good News that through the cross of Christ the condemning record of our sin has been erased.</li> </ol> <p>The Bible must be understood in this way, or it will not be understood at all.</p> </li> </ol>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>The Radical Position</b></p> <p>redaction, and content critic—that is, he makes decisions about the meaning of the text entirely on the way he relates the text to the history from which it emerged. The text is not interpreted as though by some supernatural activity it represents more than the result of historically conditioned human reflection and thought.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>The Mediating Position</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Theological Dimension</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The theological dimension has to do with the “intention” or purpose of the biblical literature. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. It is not the intention and purpose of the biblical writings to state facts about all sorts of things and subjects, but to witness to the truth about man’s sinfulness and God’s grace.</li> <li>b. The Bible must be studied with the expectation of hearing God speak in judgment and mercy to the heart, rather than of learning inerrant information addressed by God to man’s intellect. The Law-Gospel dialectic is therefore the key for interpreting the Bible.</li> </ol> </li> </ol>

The Historical-Grammatical (Traditional) View	The Historical-Critical View	
<p>2. With these indispensable emphases in mind, Lutherans employ principles for interpreting the Bible that flow from the fact that it is a divine book whose primary Author is the Holy Spirit.</p> <p>a. Since it is the Holy Spirit who bears witness in all the Holy Scriptures to God’s actions in human history for the salvation of the world, this witness is consistent with itself and true to the facts. Therefore, a basic principle for interpreting the Holy Spirit’s writings is that they are characterized both by <u>unity</u> and <u>truthfulness</u>.</p> <p>b. Because there is perfect unity in the Scriptural witness to God and His mighty deeds for our redemption, Lutherans operate confidently with the principle that <u>Scripture interprets Scripture</u>.</p> <p>(1) It is the Spirit’s authorship of the Scriptures that makes a meaningful application of this principle possible. If the Bible were merely a human book written from a variety of human perspectives and reflecting only human attempts to talk about God and history, then the unity necessary in order to use one part of Scripture to interpret another would be totally missing.</p> <p>(2) Since the Spirit of Truth is the Author of Scripture, the witness of Scripture to the history in which God acted savingly is true. This is not to say that the Scriptures are mere chronicles, or that they were written in the first instance to be a history of Israel and a biography of Jesus. The Bible reports history to show what God was doing through Israel and Jesus to accomplish His saving purposes. The history reported in the Bible is selective. In the Bible God has given us a theology of history.</p>	<p><b>The Radical Position</b></p>	<p><b>The Mediating Position</b></p> <p>2. The Law/Gospel dialectic is the proper theological approach.</p> <p>a. To interpret the Bible correctly it is necessary to distinguish between Law and Gospel. The Lutheran Confessions remind us that “in some places the Scripture presents the Law, while in others it presents the Gospel” (Ap, IV, 185). The Confessions point out that unless this fact is kept in mind together with the rule that “the Law cannot be kept without Christ” (Ap, IV, 183), the promise will be abolished and the whole Bible will be regarded as a book providing us with prescriptions for earning God’s favor.</p> <p>b. The mediating historical-critical position, however, seems to understand the statement that in <u>some</u> places the Scripture presents Law, while in <u>others</u> it presents Gospel to mean that it is <u>solely</u> and <u>exclusively</u> the purpose and intent of Scripture to present Law and Gospel. Therefore, beyond the historical level, the interpreter’s work is to search out how a pericope teaches Law and Gospel.</p> <p>c. The mediating position holds, for instance, that even though a biblical pericope has the external literary form of an historical narrative, it must not be uncritically assumed that it is the intention of the text to narrate history. Such an assumption creates problems for the interpreter when he discovers that parallel accounts contain “differences” which he is unable to harmonize. While problems of this nature pose difficulties for the interpreter on the historical level, on the theological level he remembers that it is always the real intent of Scripture in some places to present Law and in other places to present Gospel.</p>

The Historical-Grammatical (Traditional) View	The Historical-Critical View	
<p>(3) But the history which the Bible does report is wholly reliable. If the history is negated, then what God was doing in the history is negated too, and the Bible is turned into a book of mythology about the doings of the deity which have nothing to do with human affairs.</p> <p>(4) It is a principle for Lutheran biblical interpretation that the Bible is not mythology, but a revelation from God Himself about what He actually did in the arena of human history in order to carry out His eternal counsels of salvation.</p> <p>c. In interpreting the Bible, Lutherans remember that the Spirit has spoken through <u>men</u> whose words must be understood in the light of their historical context. They remember, too, that the <u>Spirit</u> has spoken through men and that this fact gives the historical words of men a new, divine dimension; it makes them the eternal truth about God's saving will and actions.</p>	<p><b>The Radical Position</b></p>	<p><b>The Mediating Position</b></p> <p>d. According to the mediating position, even if it were the text's intention to relate history, the interpreter must not expect the biblical authors to operate with the same criteria of what is history or accuracy as we do, for the reliability or inerrancy of the Scriptures cannot be determined by twentieth century standards of factuality.</p> <p>e. Because the purpose of the Scriptures is to lead us into the whole truth about what God was doing in Jesus Christ, proponents of the mediating position claim that any approach to the Scriptures which focuses on the need for historical factuality rather than on the primary need for Christ leads us away from Christ rather than to Him. They assert that concern for historical accuracy is an attempt to lead people to accept the promise on the basis of historical verification rather than by faith alone, and is therefore a subtle attempt to substitute sight for faith.</p>

#### IV. WHAT IS THE PROPER USE OF THE BIBLE?

The Historical-Grammatical (Traditional) View	The Historical-Critical View	
<p>1. Because Lutherans believe, teach and confess that the words of the Holy Scriptures are from the Holy Spirit (Ap, IV, 107-108; AC, XXVIII, 49), they therefore hold that the Bible is qualitatively different from "human being's writings" (FC, SD, Summary, 9; Ap, XXIV, 94-95). They do not hesitate to call the Bible the "unalterable" and "infallible" divine truth (Preface, Book of Concord, pp. 5 and 12).</p>	<p><b>The Radical Position</b></p> <p>1. When historical reasoning is applied to the Bible, the expectation to find a core of truth underneath all the layers of historically conditioned interpretation is forfeited from the outset. When the last accretion is peeled off, there is no core left. Historical reasoning is not a more efficient "can-opener" to get at the same old content. When this "can-opener" is used, the can turns out to be empty of any eternal truth.</p>	<p><b>The Mediating Position</b></p> <p>1. The mediating position casts doubt upon the Gospels as reliable and authoritative accounts of the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth.</p> <p>a. The Gospels are regarded and interpreted as historically conditioned theological documents which inform us primarily about the early Christian community's post-Easter faith and witness.</p>

The Historical-Grammatical (Traditional) View	The Historical-Critical View	
<p>2. Confessional Lutheran theology, accordingly, declares that “we base our position on the Word of God as the eternal truth” (FC, SD, Summary, 13); “the Word of God is and should remain the sole rule and norm of all doctrine” (FC, SD, Summary, 9); “the Holy Scripture remains the only judge, rule, and norm according to which as the only touchstone all doctrines should and must be understood and judged as good or evil, right or wrong” (FC, Ep, Summary, 7); “the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments are the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised and judged” (FC, Ep, Summary, 1; FC, SD, Summary, 3).</p> <p>a. These quotations from the Symbols leave little doubt about how they use the Bible, namely, as the <u>ultimate</u> and <u>absolute authority</u> for</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>The Radical Position</b></p> <p>a. Obviously, the biblical literature cannot be used as a source of truth concerning things of which it speaks. It is a source of information only about the way its <u>authors</u> thought about God, man, history, nature, and other things.</p> <p>b. Translated anthropologically (i.e., understood as literature from which we learn something about <u>man</u>), the biblical literature is useful to see how people in an ancient and pre-scientific culture conceived man’s place in the total scheme of things and understood human existence.</p> <p>c. From the standpoint of historical reasoning, the Bible yields no permanently valid truth relative to any of the subjects it talks about, and therefore is not to be used as an authority either in matters of history or theology. To do so would be like using Aristotle’s <u>Metaphysics</u> as a textbook for nuclear science.</p> <p>2. Especially to be rejected is the Bible’s authority as source and norm of our theology. There are several reasons for this.</p> <p>a. Due to the “historicalness” of the biblical literature, it contains a radical theological pluralism ranging from polytheism to monotheism so that no consistent theological viewpoint can be derived from it.</p> <p>b. Moreover, every biblical conception of God and His relation to human history and affairs comes from an age when people had grossly superstitious and magical notions of the divine. It is alleged that the biblical authors had no understanding of natural causation, with the result that they saw direct divine activity in every physical phenomenon and in all human activity.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>The Mediating Position</b></p> <p>b. In addition, the Gospels are regarded and interpreted as composites of numerous, and sometimes conflicting, traditions about Jesus’ life and doctrine.</p> <p>2. The intent of the Gospels was to proclaim what Jesus meant to the early Christians to the end that others would believe in Him. In carrying out this intent, the Gospels, according to the mediating historical-critical view, may ascribe works to Jesus that He never performed, put words in His mouth that He never spoke, and freely adapt for their own purposes even those accounts which report things He actually did do and say. Therefore, these accounts may have various meanings at different stages of the tradition’s development. Hence the Gospels often tell us only what <u>early Christians were saying</u> that Jesus did and taught; they may actually tell us nothing about what <u>Jesus</u> actually did and taught.</p>

The Historical-Grammatical (Traditional) View	The Historical-Critical View	
<p>all that the church teaches in God's name.</p> <p>b. That is why the Symbols repeat over and over again such formulas as "Scripture teaches" (AC, XXIV, 28; Ap, XXIII, 11; FC, SD, I, 46; FC, SD III, 30), and "it is written" (AC, XXIV, 26; XXVIII, 51; Ap, IV, 263; SA, III, vii, 1-2; III, xiii, 3; FC, SD III, 20, 57; VI, 12; VIII, 6; X, 8, 11; XI, 7).</p> <p>c. That is why the Symbols, without concern that some might accuse them of making a legislative use of Scripture, firmly insist that "wherever the Scriptures . . . give us clear, certain testimony, we shall (German: <u>sollen wir</u>, i.e., we must) simply believe it and not argue (FC, SD, VIII, 53).</p> <p>3. The Sacred Scriptures are to the Lutheran confessors the source of doctrine.</p> <p>a. In contrast to merely patristic authority, the Smalcald Articles (II, ii, 15) set up the invariable rule: "The Word of God shall establish articles of faith and no one else, not even an angel." The Augsburg Confession (Preface 8; Epilog to XXI, 2; XXI, 4 German) and the Apology (I, 2; II, 32-43; IV, 5, 166; XII, 16; <u>et passim</u>) appeal to the Sacred Scriptures as a whole as well as to individual passages as final authority.</p> <p>b. The "summary and generally accepted concept and form" that the Formula (SD, Summary, 1) regards as essential for basic and firm agreement in the Church is to be drawn from the Word of God. The prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of both testaments are "the pure, limpid fountain of Israel" (FC, SD Summary, 3).</p>	<p><b>The Radical Position</b></p> <p>c. Moreover, the biblical authors allegedly thought of history as deriving its significance from what the gods were doing, rather than from human striving, failure, and achievement.</p> <p>d. Finally, everything they wrote about God and history allegedly reflects mythological conceptions which cannot be normative for twentieth century ideas of either God or history.</p> <p>3. Historical reasoning completely erodes the authority of the Bible so that it is useful only as a resource for studying anthropology.</p>	<p><b>The Mediating Position</b></p> <p>3. From the mediating viewpoint, historical discrepancies in the New Testament Gospel accounts do not shake our faith or invalidate these accounts as Word of God. According to this view, the Gospel is a <u>promise</u> grounded in historical events and addressed to our faith, not a report of historical events addressed to our reason. Accordingly, faith is said to rest in the promise of a faithful God rather than in the accuracy of ancient historians.</p>

The Historical-Grammatical (Traditional) View	The Historical-Critical View	
<p>4. The fathers of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod agreed wholeheartedly with the Symbols that the Holy Scriptures are the “final authority” for theology.</p> <p>a. Dr. C. F. W. Walther resisted the idea that the Bible is the kind of book that one needs to read “with constant sharp discrimination in order not to be led into error” (<u>Lehre und Wehre</u>, 1886, p. 76). Echoing the symbols, he said “It is written” and added, “thereby the matter is settled” (<u>Lutherstunde</u>, February 12, 1886).</p> <p>He also wrote: “Our church has taken for the foundation on which she stands the Holy Scriptures, and on it she stands honestly and squarely; from this foundation she will not depart one finger’s breadth. . . . That is her character, that is her charge, that makes her a blessing to all Christendom, that is her crown, of which she will not and cannot let herself be robbed” (<u>Lehre und Wehre</u>, 1871, p. 11).</p> <p>For Walther, the Holy Scriptures were to be used as the sole and final authority for theology.</p> <p>b. Dr. F. <u>Pieper</u> said: “The Church of the Reformation stands on the rock of Holy Scripture, on the <u>Sola Scriptura</u>” (<u>Lehre und Wehre</u>, 1928, p. 14).</p> <p>c. Dr. F. <u>Bente</u> warned that “the entire theological edifice is undermined and hollowed out if it is no longer borne by the inspired, infallible Word of Scripture . . . If the Bible is no longer the infallible Word of God but a human, fallible record of the things of which it treats, the <u>loci classici</u> and <u>dicta probantia</u> [i.e. classical proof passages for a position or doctrine] are no longer of any avail. A veritable deluge of</p>	<p><b>The Radical Position</b></p>	<p><b>The Mediating Position</b></p> <p>4. When discussing the Bible’s authority, the mediating view circumvents the problem of the Bible’s historical accuracy by shifting the emphasis to the <u>power</u> of the Word. It is emphasized that the inspiration of the written Word pertains to the effective power of the Scriptures to bring men and women to salvation through the Gospel, and has nothing to do with the accuracy of its statements. Accordingly, the Sacred Scriptures are not to be used as an infallible textbook of history, or as an authority on matters of science, or even as a sourcebook of doctrine, for it is not the purpose and intent of the Scriptures to provide information for the intellect.</p>

The Historical-Grammatical (Traditional) View	The Historical-Critical View	
<p>all manner of skeptical questions concerning the origin and content of Scripture is unloosed which cannot be checked and controlled” (<i>Lehre und Wehre</i>, 1902, p. 130).</p> <p>5. Lutherans think it is “rash” to teach something that passages of Scripture do not teach (Ap, XII, 138), and that it is “extreme impudence” to teach anything that is contrary to testimonies of Scripture (Ap, XXIII, 63).</p> <p>a. Lutherans, therefore, hold “that it is only from the Word of God that judgments on articles of faith are to be pronounced” (FC, SD, II, 8). They accept “without reservation . . . the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the written Word of God and the only rule and norm of faith and of practice” (Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Constitution, Art. II, 1).</p> <p>b. Lutherans appeal to and use the Sacred Scriptures as a whole, as well as individual passages of Scripture, as the sole and final authority in the Church.</p>	<p><b>The Radical Position</b></p>	<p><b>The Mediating Position</b></p> <p>5. The mediating position stresses that Holy Scripture is addressed to faith that appropriates the Promise. In this view, the Promise often appears to be treated as the only constant in the Scriptures.</p> <p>a. Significantly, proponents of this position, even with respect to the Promise, emphasize the rich variety of biblical ways to portray the Gospel event, or word the Promise, and point out that we must not try to impose our particular way of wording the Gospel on people.</p> <p>b. The Bible is a book which contains the theological literature of peoples of various periods of ancient history who, in the thought patterns and literary devices of their time, confessed their faith in the Promise that God is at work in human history to bring blessings to the human family.</p> <p>c. The purpose and intent of these Sacred Scriptures is to beget and preserve a similar confidence in the hearts of troubled men in every generation so that through patience and comfort of the Scriptures they might have hope.</p> <p>d. The proper use of the Bible, then, is not as the norm of <u>the</u> faith (i.e., as the authority which determines the body of doctrine to be believed), but as the power which calls us to trust God’s promise of benevolence (i.e., as our authority for daring to trust in God’s kindly intentions toward us).</p>

\* \* \* \* \*

## RESOLUTION ON THE HISTORICAL-CRITICAL METHOD

(NOTE: The following resolution was adopted by the Commission on Theology and Church Relations on March 28, 1973.)

WHEREAS, The historical-critical method makes decisions about the origin, nature, and interpretation of the Biblical literature on the basis of a *historical* reasoning which by definition is a procedure unable to deal with supernatural intervention and operations; and

WHEREAS, The use of such historical reasoning in accounting for the origin of the Biblical literature tends to minimize the “connection between the Spirit and history” (*Revelation, Inspiration, and Inerrancy*, p. 3, par. 9) and fails to take into account that in history the *Spirit* creates that which is not of this world; and

WHEREAS, The use of such historical reasoning not only obscures the Spirit’s connection with the history of the Bible’s origin but at the same time emphasizes the *human* factors in the production of the sacred literature in such a way that the Bible is virtually reduced to a product of merely human thought and experience; and

WHEREAS, Such historical reasoning, by accounting for the production of the Biblical literature chiefly in terms of merely human historically conditioned responses to a series of needs and situations among God’s people in the Old and New Testament eras, and by regarding the Biblical literature as only human beings’ writings, so tenuates the Spirit’s authorship as to evaporate the unity of the Bible and to make inoperative the basic principle that the Bible interprets itself; and

WHEREAS, Such historical reasoning which proposes that each constituent unit of the Biblical literature must be understood wholly in the light of its use through various states of oral and written transmission negates also the principle that a Biblical text has only one meaning; and

WHEREAS, A view of the origin and nature of the Biblical literature which denies the unity of the holy writings and ascribes multiple meanings to a sacred text in effect renders the Bible useless as the absolute and final authority for all that the church does and teaches in God’s name; therefore be it

*Resolved*, That the CTCR recommend to the Synod:

1) That it reject and repudiate as opposed to sound Lutheran theology and as injurious to the Gospel any view of the Bible and method of interpreting it which relates history to the production of the sacred writings in such a way as to diminish their “not-of-this-world” character and to deprive them of their divine authority;

2) That it reassure the members of the Synod that the Synod still adheres faithfully to its historic position that the Scriptures are God’s very own inspired, inerrant, and authoritative Word for all matters of doctrine and practice;

3) That it call upon its responsible officers to implement evangelically the provisions of the Synod’s Constitution and Bylaws which were intended to assure that in all institutions under the Synod’s control this position will be upheld and preserved;

4) That it beseech the pastors, teachers, and congregations of the Synod, by the mercies of God, to continue to uphold the Synod’s position.