

## A REPLY TO GERHARD MAIER: A REVIEW ARTICLE

John Piper\*

*The End of the Historical-Critical Method.*  
Gerhard Maier. St. Louis: Concordia, 1977.

*Das Ende der historisch-kritischen Methode* by Gerhard Maier appeared in Germany in 1974 and in the following year went through a second and third edition. In 1975 Peter Stuhlmacher, NT scholar at the University of Tübingen, did this book the honor of devoting a whole excursus to it in his own *Schriftauslegung auf dem Wege zur biblischen Theologie* (Göttingen, 1975). The central essay of Stuhlmacher's book including his response to Maier is now translated as *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Fortress, 1977).

The pastorally oriented bimonthly journal, *Theologische Beiträge*, edited by Otto Michel in Tübingen has done us a great service in providing a forum for the discussion that has continued to develop since Maier's book was published. In 1976 Helgo Lindner responded to the Stuhlmacher-Maier controversy with an article entitled "Widerspruch oder Vermittlung? Zum Gespräch mit G. Maier und P. Stuhlmacher über eine biblische Hermeneutik" (*Theol. Beit.* 7 [1976] 185-197). Then in 1977 Stuhlmacher responded to Lindner briefly with "Biblische Theologie und kritische Exegese" (*Theol. Beit.* 8 [1977] 88-90), as did Maier with "Einer biblischen Hermeneutik entgegen? Zum Gespräch mit P. Stuhlmacher und H. Lindner" (*Theol. Beit.* 8 [1977] 148-160). In this article Maier sharpened the focus of his criticism and directed some pointed queries to Stuhlmacher.

In January 1978 a group of theology students at the University of Tübingen, coming from a tradition described as "pietistisch, erwecklich, evangelikal, Gemeinschaftsbewegung," brought together Maier and Stuhlmacher for an evening of discussion. The questions clustered around the issues of "Mitte der Schrift bzw. Kanon im Kanon," "Hermeneutik der Schrift" (e.g., "new birth" and hermeneutics) and "Wertigkeit der Schrift." The authorized protocol of the discussion appeared in *Theol. Beit.* 9 (1978) 222-234.

One other essay should be mentioned in this context. In his article, "Hauptprobleme und Chancen kirchlicher Schriftauslegung" (*Theol. Beit.* 9 [1978] 53-69), Stuhlmacher provides what is, in my opinion, the clearest statement of his hermeneutical position over against the radical historical critics and over against Gerhard Maier. He devotes long footnotes to answering Maier's earlier queries.

One implication we may draw from this increasingly lively and widespread debate in Germany is that a book like Maier's *The End of the Historical-Critical Method* cannot be ignored by the scholarly establishment. Stuhlmacher's willingness to pursue a long discussion with Maier is not merely due to his magnanimity but also to his keen perception of how continually crucial in the life of the

\*John Piper is assistant professor of Biblical studies at Bethel College, St. Paul, Minnesota.

Church are the issues that Maier has raised. The following limited (but I hope pointed) critique of Maier's book is based on this same conviction.

## I. RESTATEMENT

Gerhard Maier aims first to demonstrate that the "Historical-Critical" method "had to fail because it was not suited to the subject"—that is, the Bible or divine revelation (pp. 49, 15, 23). Then, secondly, he defends and delineates an alternative "Historical-Biblical" method that aims to conform itself to the demands of divine revelation (pp. 89, 25).

Chap. 2 is devoted to showing the present situation into which two hundred years of historical-critical method has led theology. He sums up on pp. 47-48: (1) The exegetes can no longer conceive of the NT as a unity; (2) following Semler (p. 15) it is agreed by them that the formal canon cannot be equated with the Word of God; (3) after two hundred years the search for a determinate canon within the canon has failed; (4) therefore uncontrolled subjectivity has the last word concerning what should have divine authority; (5) Roman Catholics take refuge in the teaching office of the Church, and Protestants appeal to "the spiritual experience of the congregation, which produces a unity in contrast to Scripture research and thereby in practice comes to stand above Scripture" (p. 48).

Maier's response to this situation is this: "The decisive factor today is that we must take advantage of the opportunity, in a time of breakdown and of greater perspective over against its origin, to develop a new orientation. The question is: Is this method (historical-critical) suitable for use with this subject matter (Bible, revelation)?" (pp. 13-14).

Maier answers this question negatively. His negative answer follows (1) from his assumption that "the generally accepted canonical Scriptures are really the witness of divine revelation" (p. 23) and (2) from his observation that the goal of "criticism" is "to bring to an end the 'confusion between Scripture and God's Word'" (p. 20); in other words, its goal is to find the authoritative canon within the formal canon (p. 15). Obviously if the formal canon is entirely divine revelation, then a method that aims to distinguish some of it as the Word of God and some as superstition (as Käsemann does, pp. 37-38) is inappropriate. "The concept and development of the higher-critical method present an inner impossibility to the extent that one holds to the position that the witness of divine revelation is presented in the canonical Scriptures" (pp. 24, 23).

Therefore Maier's chief indictment of the historical-critical method (as he understands it) is that it does not assume with him that the whole canon is divine revelation. Instead it proceeds as if divine revelation must be sifted out of the canon. Therefore the validity of Maier's indictment hangs on whether he can support his assumption that the canonical Scriptures teach only the true Word of God. How does he support this?

His answer is contained in the following sentences:

The correlative or counterpart to revelation is not critique but obedience; it is not correction . . . but it is a let-me-be-corrected. . . . Over against revelation the only way of examining or testing is the experiment: "If any man will do His will, he shall know the doctrine, whether it be of God or whether I speak of Myself" (John 7:17). Jesus is here speaking about *doing* God's will, i.e. carrying out His will with body, soul, and spirit. This experiment is called trust or faith in the

New Testament. Anyone who wants prior knowledge without such active faith cannot help but go astray (p. 23).

In another place Maier says again of John 7:17:

This is the only methodological principle Jesus offered for the sure gaining of understanding in the area of revelation. In an irreversible way it deduces understanding from obedience, confirms the above-mentioned idea that revelation and obedience, not revelation and critique, are corresponding terms, and proclaims the failure of every attempt to acquire an orderly grasp of revelation with the yardstick of analogy or any other attempted standard. Thus it has been stated correctly: *credo ut intellegam* (I believe in order to understand) not *credo, quia intellego* (I believe because I understand) (p. 54).

If I understand him, Maier does not wish to support his assumption that the entire canon is divine revelation. One cannot argue for it, one can only believe it by an act of the will. To try to give reasons for it that do not already presuppose it would mean applying criteria of verification to the Scriptures that are used on ordinary human documents. But, he argues, "it would be strange if scholarly inquiry in rendering account of subjects related to divine revelation should be subject to the same rules of method that apply to those subjects which have to do with nature or human history" (p. 53). Moreover the intellectual effort to ground one's acceptance of the canon as the Word of God would involve one in the use of human reason "which, like man himself, as a result of sin is *moribundus* (subject to death) and also *morbidus* (diseased)" (p. 23).

Consequently, although Maier courteously demurs from blaming the confusion in theology on the "*methodizers*" and attempts to blame it on the method itself, nevertheless it is a necessary implication of his own method that the critics have gone astray because they have not made the leap of faith to accept the whole Bible as divine revelation. The fundamental fault of the critics is that "contrary to the scriptural viewpoint . . . [they] permitted conscience and will to be guided by knowledge" (p. 14). They should have put active, obedient faith in the Bible before they had knowledge of its revelatory status, for "anyone who wants prior knowledge without such active faith cannot help but go astray" (p. 23).

This, as I see it, is the most basic issue in Maier's book. The most distinctive elements of his own "historical-Biblical" method (chap. 3) follow from his position on this issue. Therefore this is the point at which Maier's book must be most carefully judged.

## II. REPLY

Gerhard Maier is a responsible and courteous scholar who sincerely desires to help lead contemporary theology out of its deplorable confusion. For this I praise him. Not only for this does he deserve credit, but also for his clear portrayal (in spite of a poor translation from the German) of our present plight and for his valid demonstration of the biases of the "critics" and the need for openness to the uniqueness of their subject matter. I feel a strong kinship with Maier as he laments the almost unquestioning acceptance by many critics of the necessity of seeking a canon within the canon. But I question seriously whether his fundamental criticism and suggested alternative have very much force or are as Scriptural as he thinks.

Let us go straight to the heart of the matter. Maier says that the only way of testing a revelation to know if it is of God is the "experiment" of John 7:17. Here is the context of that text:

15. The Jews were amazed, saying, "How does this one know the Scriptures, not having been taught?" 16. Therefore Jesus answered them and said, "My teaching is not mine but his who sent me. 17. If someone wants to do his will (*tis thelē to thelēma autou poiein*), he shall know concerning the teaching, whether it is from God or whether I speak from myself. 18. The one who speaks from himself seeks his own glory; but the one who seeks the glory of the one who sent him, this one is true and there is no unrighteousness in him. 19. Has not Moses given you the law? And yet none of you does the law."

Maier interprets this to mean that faith precedes and is the means to recognizing that Jesus speaks from God. He does not give a detailed exegesis here, and his statement is somewhat ambiguous (faith in what, precisely?), so it is difficult to argue with him on this very crucial point. I will simply offer my interpretation of this passage and try to show that it does not lead to Maier's conclusions.

First, the translation of John 7:17 is wrong (this may be due to the misunderstanding of the German by the English translators). The text does not say, "If any man will do his will. . ."; it says, "If any man wants (*thelē*) to do his will. . ."

Second, we must bear in mind that Jesus is talking to "the Jews" (v 15) and that the will of God that they should want to do (but do not do) is expressed in the law of Moses (v 19). Thus Jesus stands on common ground with the Jews in that they both claim to believe the God of Moses and to do his will. Jesus proceeds from this common ground.

Third, the text does not say that one must first trust Jesus in order to know he is from God. It does not say you must believe his claim in order to know it is true. What v 17 says is that the Jewish opposition to God's will expressed in the law of Moses is blinding them to the truth of the Son of the God of Moses. The only way for them to be able to know that Jesus speaks from God is to stop hating the will of God and to start loving it. The hardness of heart that causes us to proudly reject the way of God imprisons us in ignorance (cf. John 3:19-21; Eph 4:18), for our minds will find a way to suppress any truth (Rom 1:18) that our hearts want badly enough not to believe. Thus the means of knowing the truth of Jesus in John 7:17 is the transformation of one's desires so that they accord with truth. The heart thus freed from hardness and rebellion will allow the mind to acknowledge as true what is evidently so. On the basis of this recognition, and no doubt simultaneously with it, the true messenger of God will be embraced in faith.

A parallel text in John 5:41-47 confirms this interpretation. Jesus again speaks to "the Jews" (cf. 5:16, 18):

41. I do not receive glory from men. 42. But I know you, that you do not have the love of God within you. 43. I have come in my Father's name, and you do not receive me. If another comes in his own name, that one you will receive. 44. How are you able to believe if you are receiving glory from each other and do not seek the glory that comes from God? 45. Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father. The one who will accuse you is Moses in whom you have hoped. 46. For if you believed Moses, you would have believed me, for he spoke concerning me. 47. But if you do not believe the writings of that one, how shall you believe my words?

Verse 44 makes plain that a chief barrier to faith is that the Jews loved the glory of men more than the glory of God (12:43). Or, as v 43 says, they do not love God. Therefore Moses will condemn the Jews, because he commanded that men love God with all their hearts (Deut 6:5) and he warned against the sin of vainglory (Deut 8). But the Jews rejected Moses (vv 46-47) and loved the praise of their fellows. Therefore when Jesus came seeking not his own glory but the glory of the one who sent him (7:18; 8:49-50) he was a threat to the Jews, for to believe on Jesus would involve abandoning the quest for human glory, which they loved more than God. They loved darkness and hated the light (3:19-20).

The way to faith therefore involved a transformation of the affections. If a man loves the darkness of self-adulation his mind will not own up to the evidences of the light in Jesus. In unrighteousness he will suppress the truth (Rom 1:18). This transformation of the affections is called the new birth in John and does not come from the will of man but from God's Spirit (John 1:13; 1 John 5:1), who blows wherever he wills (John 3:8). For Luke it is the opening of a person's heart by the Lord to give heed to the gospel (Acts 16:14). For Paul it is the creative act of God banishing darkness from the veiled heart as at the beginning of creation (2 Cor 4:6). But this divine work of grace in the human heart is not faith—it is not "of the will of man." It is the miraculous cure of a disease that has crippled man and made faith impossible (cf. John 5:44). The love of darkness is replaced by the "desire to do the will of God" (7:17). The mind is unshackled from the unrighteousness that hated the light, and man is freed to see and to reason in the lucid, fresh air of truth. Therefore when this man sees the glory of God in the face of Christ he acknowledges it for what it is, and on the basis of this evidence—"the ineffable, distinguishing, evidential excellency of the gospel" (Jonathan Edwards)—he puts his faith in Christ and in his word as divine revelation. (See my article, "The Glory of God as the Ground of Faith," *The Reformed Journal* 26/9 [November 1976] 17-20 for a fuller statement of this process.)

If my understanding of the NT is correct, then Maier is wrong to say that it is contrary to Scripture to permit the conscience and the will to be guided by knowledge (p. 14). While I have acknowledged that the inclination of a man's will holds tremendous sway over what his mind will acknowledge to be true, yet it does not follow that he should base his decisions on anything other than knowledge. A man is responsible for observing and owning up to the truth around him and for bringing his will and actions into accord with it, no matter how difficult this is made by his own love of falsehood. If this were not so Rom 1:18-21 would make no sense, for in these verses man's inexcusability for not glorifying and thanking God is based squarely on the knowledge available to him, even though his perverse will causes him to suppress the truth.

I conclude then that in the NT the process by which one comes to trust in Jesus as one who speaks truth from God has three steps: (1) God regenerates the sinner's heart and thus transforms his affections, freeing him from the love of darkness and the compulsion to suppress the truth; (2) in the new clarity of sight and freedom of rationality he perceives the real evidence and genuine grounds for the truth of Jesus' claims and acknowledges them for what they are; and (3) he embraces Jesus as his own Lord and joyfully trusts in his words. Thus faith is the response to knowledge that is grounded in real evidence.

The implication of this for Biblical scholarship is that the only proper way to

bring a person to believe in divine revelation is to offer reasons or grounds that the mind can assess as true or false. We may indeed pray that God would open the hearts of our listeners to give heed to our arguments, but that is his job and not ours. Ours is to bear witness to what we have seen and heard (1 John 1:3), to reason, to explain and to give evidence, as Paul so often did in his missionary preaching (Acts 17:3).

The objection that man's reason is diseased due to the fall and that it is therefore no reliable guide in determining what is revelation has no force, because man has no other faculty of knowing and, as we saw from Rom 1:20-21, God holds him accountable for using that faculty rightly. Moreover, any other guide one may choose to put in its place is just as fallen. A step of fallen reason is no more likely to be wrong than a leap of fallen will. What we need to remember is that even though we may be prone to irrationality due to our sinfulness, yet there is such a thing as reasonableness and that should be our goal in all our thinking. Furthermore we should not despair at the possibility of being reasonable, because God grants a "renewal of the mind" to his people (Rom 12:2; Eph 4:23). Therefore the Biblical scholar should employ his reason to discover, expound and demonstrate the truth of the Bible.

This means that the knowledge of whether the canon of Scripture is divine revelation in whole or in part will be determined by the use of the reader's mind. The alternative is an epistemology that demands your most precious possession—the acknowledgment of truth—in exchange for a fortune cookie, an epistemology with the rules of Russian roulette. The scholar—and every reasonable man—will have nothing to do with the coercive mentality that demands faith without knowledge based on real evidence.

Does this then mean that Biblical criticism presents an "inner impossibility" (pp. 23, 25) when dealing with revelation? Yes, if "criticism" includes a rigid principle of analogy that disallows the unique in history as developed and articulated, for example, by Ernst Troeltsch, "Über historische und dogmatische Methode in der Theologie," *Theologie als Wissenschaft* (ed. G. Sauter; TBü, 1971) 105-127. But such a principle is an unreasonable restriction, for there is no good reason to think something could not happen just once. Nor should we allow Maier to give the impression that all historical critics in Germany use "criticism" in this way. Peter Stuhlmacher, who criticizes Maier so severely, typifies a growing disenchantment with "an objective naturalistic view of history" with its "insolent attitude of control." In the most illuminating part of his book mentioned earlier (pp. 83-89) Stuhlmacher pleads for a "hermeneutics of consent" whose first principle is "openness to transcendence" (p. 84). Martin Hengel represents the same tendency when he writes, "It is precisely in light of the biblical tradition that we should be able to recognize the markedly defective view of history which has stamped historical-criticism and to a great degree still determines it. As long as inadequate and even inhibiting premises are not conquered here, we cannot get free of the difficulties in contemporary exegesis" (ZNW 63 [1972] 17; see also Hahn, "Die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft," *Wissenschaftliche Theologie im Überblick* [ed. W. Lohff and F. Hahn; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1974] 28-38).

So Maier is not alone in taking the historical-critical method to task for the unreasonable restrictions it has often placed on the possibilities of history. At this point his criticism of the critics is sound (pp. 16, 50-52). He is also correct in re-

jecting what he calls the "dissonance method" (p. 56), which approaches the text with a controlling desire to find contradictions.

The reasonable critic will not assume disunity in the NT but will be open to finding complete harmony among all its teachings. But neither will he be closed to the possibility of disunity. Depending on his stance of faith he may hope for one or the other. But he will strive objectively to understand what the Biblical authors wanted to say and to accord them all the truth and acceptance that the evidences demand. Therefore what is needed in the turmoil of today's exegesis is a return to humble, open reasonableness and an abandonment of the irrational fear of unity and harmony in the NT.