

Form Criticism
“The Period of Oral Tradition”
By Dan Fabricatore

Introduction

Form Criticism (FC) is both easy to define and yet difficult to explain. Form Criticism has an almost universal definition among its proponents as being a method of analyzing the individual units that make up the Gospels.¹ These units are then classified by genre or “form.” What makes FC difficult to explain or appreciate is its highly subjective nature.

Definition

While FC had its origin in the study of the Old Testament with the likes of Hermann Gunkel and Julius Wellhausen, three German scholars, namely K.L. Schmidt, M. Dibelius, and R. Bultmann, have heavily influenced New Testament Form Criticism. The effect of these men on New Testament studies can not be overestimated.

FC may be defined as *that methodological procedure that seeks to determine, based upon existing written gospel sources, what were (are) the underlying oral traditions which were the basis for these written sources.* F.F. Bruce defined FC in the following way:

Form criticism (Ger. *Formgeschichte*, “form history”) represents an endeavor to determine the oral prehistory of written documents or sources, and to classify the material according to various “forms” or categories of narrative, discourse, and so forth.²

Similarly, McKnight defines it as “a discipline of historians designed to uncover from written traditions underlying oral traditions which were transmitted in given forms under certain laws of transmission and utilized in specific church contexts.”³ McKnight’s definition goes a bit further than Bruce’s in that it assumes that these isolated oral units of tradition were floating around the church long before ever being written down. It is this role of the church in the final form of the Gospels that has sparked much debate in the area of FC.

¹ cf. C.L. Blomberg, “Form Criticism” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 243; Scot McKnight, *Interpreting the Synoptic Gospels*, 71-76; See entire work of Rudolf Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*. Bultmann is considered the pioneer of form criticism.

² “Criticism” in *I.S.B.E.*, 1:822.

³ *Interpreting the Synoptic Gospels*, 72.

FC is based on a few major presuppositions.⁴ The first one is that the words and works of Jesus were passed down orally for some extended period of time before ever being written down.⁵ These units of tradition were circulated independently of other similar units until a later time when the “evangelists” took these sayings and traditions and composed them into the gospel records we now possess. It is this oral period that FC seeks to resurrect. Secondly, FC holds that these oral traditions were passed on according to certain basic laws of transmission and that they were passed on unconnected to each other, being independent or isolated sayings. Thirdly, these oral traditions were passed on to the church to meet a basic need. The discovery of this setting or *Sitz im leben* is also a necessary part of FC.

FC therefore has three basic objectives. First, to classify each individual passage or unit. Secondly, to assign each pericope a *Sitz im leben*. And lastly, to recover the original form of the material that existed in the oral period.

Literary Forms or genres

Form critics employ a variety of lists and descriptions though no two lists seem to be identical.⁶ Not only are no two systems of classification exact, there is at times overlap in classification. Bruce notes that regarding narrative material,

A narrative may be assignable to more than one “form”; thus the incident of the paralyzed man (Mk. 2:1-12) is a pronouncement story because the criticism that breaks out when Jesus forgives the man’s sins is silenced by Jesus’ pronouncement that “the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins” (Mk. 2:10); but it can also be classified as a miracle story, more specifically a healing story.⁷

The most common of classifications are as follows.

(1) Individual Logia or sayings

This broad classification includes wisdom and/or proverbial sayings such as Matthew 8:20: “The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air *have* nests...” Also included in this list are prophetic and apocalyptic sayings such as those found in Luke 12:54-56 where Jesus teaches that through observation of the sky people can predict the coming whether,

⁴ Ibid., 72-74. cf. also Carson, Moo, Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 21-23. They list six assumptions on which Form Criticism is built. cf. also Bock, “Form Criticism” in *Interpreting the New Testament*, 108-110.

⁵ Bock, “Form Criticism” 107.

⁶ R. Thomas and D. Farnell, *The Jesus Crisis*, 195; “Form Criticism” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 243; Bruce, “Criticism,” 1:823.

⁷ Bruce, “Criticism,” 1:823.

yet they are unable to “analyze this present time.” This classification also includes legal sayings or church rules (Mk. 7:6-8).

(2) Pronouncement stories

These are short stories about an action of Jesus given for the purpose of making a climactic announcement on a particular topic.⁸ An classic example would be in Mark 2:17 when Jesus, after eating and associating with the dregs of society, said to his critics, “I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” Others would be Mark 3:31-35; 12:13-17. They are often found in contexts that pit Jesus against his adversaries.⁹

(3) Parables

Parables are forms of literature that are often associated with allegories, proverbs, types, and poetry as “mixed forms.”¹⁰

(4) Speeches

Speeches are those longer units of speech that many form critics believe were constructed from shorter forms that circulated in the church for some time as independent sayings (i.e. the Sermon on the Mount in Matt. 5-7). Many serious form critics do not hold that Jesus offered this teaching at one setting, but that Matthew composed this sermon out of many other utterances of Jesus (and the church, we might add).

(5) Miracle stories

These are the accounts of the supernatural activity of Jesus that are usually broken down into two categories, healing miracles (i.e. Mark 1:4-45) and nature miracles (Mark 4:35-41). Among form critics, the emphasis is not on the actual reality of whether a miracle took place, but on the ways a certain passage is classified as to its form.

Evaluation of Form Criticism

The very heart of the expression “Form Criticism” denotes the presuppositional foundation on which it is built. The expression comes from the German word *Formgeschichte*. The choice of *Geschichte* over the German *Historie* highlights this subjective nature. The German *Historie* denotes objective facts while *Geschichte* “dichotomizes the concept of history into interpretations of history, namely history as significance, internal and non-verifiable.”¹¹ As a matter of fact, FC is built upon an entire

⁸ “Form Criticism” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 244.

⁹ Bruce, “Criticism,” 1:823.

¹⁰ *The Jesus Crisis*, 198.

¹¹ *The Jesus Crisis*, 187.

hosts of presuppositions that questions how significant a role it can play, even “in the hands of a skilled exegete.”¹² For form critics like Bultmann, FC is the tool for discovering the exact original form of a particular passage. It is a tool for helping to determine what is and is not historical. Bultmann noted his agreement with Dibelius that FC did not exist for the sole purpose of classifying particular passages. In other words, “it does not consist of identifying the individual units of the tradition according to the aesthetic or other characteristics and placing them in various categories.”¹³ If that were all that FC sought to do, it would be a commendable process. Similar benefits of FC are seen in its use in the Old Testament for the classifying of various psalms (i.e. lament, imprecatory, pilgrimage, etc...). However the roots of FC are far more sinister. Bultmann, quoting Dibelius notes, “It is much rather ‘rediscover the origin and the history of the particular units and thereby to throw some light on the history of the tradition before it took literary form.’”¹⁴ In addition, Bultmann notes that “form criticism ... must also lead to judgements about facts (the genuineness of a saying, the historicity of a report and the like).”¹⁵

Also highly subjective is the criteria used for determining what is or is not an authentic saying. While form critics like Bultmann and others saw little in the Gospels that were directly attributable to Christ, many evangelical scholars use the same kind of methodological procedures as they employ FC to their studies. There is little difference (in my mind), between a Bultmann who saw only about 40 sayings in the Gospels that were attributable to Jesus, and a scholar like Robert Stein who holds that it is possible that sayings of Jesus as we have them in the Gospels may be inauthentic but still authoritative.¹⁶ From his perspective, they are authoritative because the church put these words on the lips of Christ. What is just as discouraging is the criteria used to arrive at such determinations, namely, a blind dependence upon hypothetical documents (“Q,” “M,” and “L”).

Conclusion

If FC for the evangelical were simply a process for the classifying of material, then it would be a benign discipline. But the New Testament seems to do this for us itself. It alerts us to certain forms of material such as parables, miracles and signs, proverbs, etc. The problem for the evangelical scholar, I believe, is when he or she starts to use FC to determine the historical accuracy of the Gospels. They have started on a slippery slope that more often than not, ends up in a liberal mindset that questions the supernatural work of God completely. We must all be aware of taking such fire into our bosom.

¹² Bock, 123.

¹³ Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, 4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁶ Robert Stein, “The Criteria for Authenticity,” in *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 1, 229.

