C. HISTORY AND PROPHECY:
THE MATRIX OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY
CHAPTER SIXTEEN

TOWARD A HISTORY OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY

THE ORIGINS OF A CURRENT PARADIGM

Two hundred years ago Edward Evanson, schoolmaster and unitarian Anglican of Mitcham England, published a book that marked a watershed in the reconstruction of early Christian history.\(^1\) He proposed a diachronic relationship of New Testament writings, dating them sequentially through the second century in terms of their theological and ecclesiastical views. To support this he initiated a tendency criticism that placed the writings variously in the first, second, and even third centuries in accordance with their perceived divergence from Luke-Acts,\(^2\) which Evanson regarded as the earliest and most reliable Christian source.\(^3\) Not unlike other writers\(^4\) he posited a dialectic between the Gospels of Luke and the later Matthew that was harmonized in the second century by Mark.\(^5\)

Evanson’s approach involved at least three historical-literary assumptions.\(^6\) (1) The earliest church was a unity. (2) Documents or parts of them that departed from the earliest teaching, that is, from

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2 E.g. the anti-Pauline attitude toward the law (Mt 5:17), the conception of an incarnate Logos (Jn 1:1, 14), the anointing with oil (Jas 5:14) and the attack on opponents of clerical power (II Peter; Jude) all reflected a time in the second century or later. Cf. Evanson, Dissonance (note 1), 141, 234f., 277, 279f.


5 Evanson, Dissonance (note 1), 117f., 212f.

6 It also assumed that christology, in accord with Evanson’s unitarian convictions, developed from the view of the earliest church that Jesus was only a man to the second-century confession of him as divine.