

A Review of *Touch Not the Unclean Thing*, by David Sorenson

By Jonathan A. Whitmer

The current plethora of modern Bible versions has given rise to an equally voluminous plethora of literature the controversy over the validity of these many versions of the Bible. The question of “Which Bible?”—to quote one book dealing with this controversy¹—is a question that will never go away as long as there are a multiplicity of Bible translations on the market, each proclaiming its unique and superior virtues over the others in clearly communicating the *message* of the underlying texts of Scripture. With so many choices made available through the endeavors of the ecclesiastically autonomous Bible Societies and publishers, one is left with the choice either to appropriate the vast variety of Bibles available at this textual *smorgasbord* or to ask whether, perhaps, the Bible has become not much more than a religious trinket to which we pay daily homage.

The evangelical world, to a large extent, has taken the Warfieldian emphasis of the inerrant autographs to its logical conclusion—the mass proliferation of Bibles of every type to fit every segment of society, with the gleaming approval of its many and varied leaders.² The receptor oriented philosophy of translation promoted today both in America and around the world through organizations such as Wycliff Bible Translators and the many Bible societies presents us with a logical quandary. If the *autographs* are (as even the average neo-evangelical will claim) inerrant, then should we not feel a bit uneasy with any translation approach or marketing tactic that betrays a less than fervent fidelity for the integrity of both the *meaning* of the autographs and the *form*? Truly the “Pandora’s box” opened by Warfield’s shotgun marriage of *scientism* with his *misrepresentation* of historic orthodox bibliology does not result in an intellectually defensible doctrine of inspiration but rather a bibliology more akin to neo-orthodoxy in its union of fairly orthodox language with modernism. For example, in many Fundamental, Independent Baptist churches, statements on inspiration—if they are “ecclesiopolitically” correct—will boldly declare a firm belief in the “inerrancy of the original manuscripts” followed by the statement that “the Scriptures [not any specific form or recension: is it the autographs only or the multiplicity of translations?] are the sole rule for faith and practice.” What is said sounds good, but little is *really* said. The question of “Which Bible?” remains without an adequate answer.

In the midst of the flurry of books—some good and some not so good—written in this continuing debate, one writer, Pastor David Sorenson has produced a book that seeks to aid his readers in making a truly informed decision amid the turmoil. His book, *Touch Not The Unclean Thing: The Text Issue and Separation*,

¹ *Which Bible?* by Fuller, David O. (ed.), Grand Rapids: Grand Rapids International Publications, 1970.

² The author of this review recalls an advertisement for the Living Bible, which appeared a number of years ago in *Christianity Today*. In this advertisement, such evangelical heroes as Chuck Colson and Billy Graham lent their *imprimatur* to that version (a mere *paraphrase*, at that!) as reliable and useful for not only personal devotional reading but also for in depth Bible study.

consolidates many of the primary arguments of other authors³ in defense of the Authorized Version and the Received texts of the Old and New Testaments (I shall heretofore refer to this family of both source text and resulting translation as *the Ecclesiastical Text*). He presents this overview of a “pro-Ecclesiastical Text” position in a way that allows the average lay-person to grasp easily some of the key arguments in defense of the Ecclesiastical Text. For this Dr. Sorenson is to be commended.

However, no book is perfect and this book presents some weaknesses that may significantly limit its effectiveness in presenting a credible defense of the Ecclesiastical Text. First, as Sorenson admits in his introduction (p.1), “the scope of this volume is from a Fundamental Baptist perspective for those of like mind.” The target audience of the book is then fellow separatist, fundamentalist independent Baptist pastors and laypersons. This is the first “twist” on his handling of the text controversy that actually skews the direction of the book. The implication might be made by those *outside* that rather limited target audience (of which I am a member), that now we have proof that a pro-KJV position is more a matter of fundamentalist in-fighting than a serious issue worth scholarly investigation. Those outside the target audience then brush off the book rather easily, as the focus of the book is convincing other fundamentalist Baptists (but no one else, of course) in the validity of a pro-KJV position. One must ask whether it matters to fundamentalist separatist Baptists if evangelicals and liberals are hereby solidified in their opposition to the KJV by such a tactic. A bad argument becomes a ready and effective weapon in the hands of one’s opponents. The theme of the book is not skewed by the survey of the different positions of the text controversy but by the insistence by the author of linking the issue with separation. Perhaps he was attempting to use as a basis for his argument a principle that is a distinctive among fundamentalists. This seems to be the implication in chapter 8, which is devoted to elaborating on the “Scriptural Principal of Separation from Apostasy.” Perhaps the author was even trying to make a non-"DMin"-type project practical enough to qualify as such. Either way, the author plays to the biases of his target audience, perhaps seeking to circumnavigate their resistance to the Ecclesiastical Text position. Would he use this approach in addressing the broader Christian community on the text issue? Once again, a lack of concern is exhibited for any of those not within the narrow circles of fundamentalism, which relegates the book to the realms of irrelevancy as far as concerns those not in that circle.

Second, linking the text issue with separation yields him to two obvious criticisms which opponents of Sorenson’s (and my) position are almost sure to make. 1) He becomes a case-in-point in the argument of anti-TR fundamentalists that pro-KJV fundamentalist are all out to divide fundamentalism.⁴ While this may not be

³ I.e. Letis, Hills, Fuller, etc

⁴ Dr. Letis points out that it was those who followed *Warfield* who were dividing fundamentalism, as Warfield’s view was the first *neo-orthodoxy* and is a perversion—if not an outright rejection—of the historic, orthodox understanding of Inspiration and Preservation as found in documents such as the Westminster Confession.

Sorenson's intention, fundamentalist critics of the KJV/TR tradition will certainly use his book in this way. He should recast his arguments in a direction that would effectively challenge thinking pastors and church leaders throughout the church, not just a very limited audience that is already fractioned by the politics of guilt-by-association. 2) He sets-up all defenders of the KJV/TR for being accused of not really knowing what they are talking about. While summarizing material from Hills and Letis, he really does not develop any new material in support of the KJV/TR, but rather seeks to establish the need to *separate* from the apostasy of Westcott and Hort as a *primary* reason for rejecting the Critical Text. While this polemic may effectively convince those who cater to sensationalism and conspiracy theories, it really does not supply a satisfying argument. If we were to follow his paradigm—of applying the principle of separation from apostasy to scholarship—to its bitter end, we would have to “separate” ourselves from Thayer's Greek Lexicon because he was a Unitarian, and we would ironically need to separate ourselves from some excellent scholarship in support of the KJV/TR because some of that scholarship may be from “unseparated” even “apostate” sources. Likewise, Sorenson leaves himself with the rather convenient situation of answering his eclectic-text critics with the retort that they are “just not separated” and therefore their contentions should be dismissed. While well intended, Sorenson's linking of the text issue to separation rings hollow and should be abandoned.

Third, Sorenson wastes significant space in his book to argue that Erasmus was essentially a fundamentalist. While Sorenson admits the fact that Erasmus never left the Roman Catholic Church, the comparison of his theological distinctives with fundamental theology (in a broad sense of the term) seems to contradict the first chapter of his book, in which he goes through great pains to establish the doctrine of separation from apostasy as a foundational creed of fundamentalism. Erasmus did not separate from the Catholic Church, therefore (to apply Sorenson's separation paradigm) why should we trust his scholarship? To reject the Critical Text on the basis of guilt-by-association justifies his opponents doing the same regarding the credibility of Erasmus and others. It is dangerous to apply contemporary labels to other historic periods, as the sociological, political and ecclesiastical climates were radically different then from now. We might as well call St. Augustine a "Calvinist" (though they were a good millennium of time apart from one another) since both he and Calvin acknowledge the fact that the Bible really does discuss election as a factor in our salvation. Erasmus, like Luther after him, viewed church tradition as subservient to Scripture, rather than equal with it. While he may very well have laid the foundation for the Reformation (or at least was a major example of Roman Catholics realizing the need for reformation), to compare the ideological results of his theological pilgrimage to “Fundamentalism” leaves the false impression that some of the stereotypes associated with that term might apply to him. It would be better if Sorenson only used the term “Fundamentalism” in conjunction with how that word is understood today rather than in comparison with men who lived 4-5 centuries ago.

Fourth, regarding the allegation that the doctrine of separation from apostasy was a foundational doctrine of fundamentalism, it might be better said that *rigorous confrontation* of apostasy is a foundation of fundamentalism, which tends to *result* in separation. J. Gresham Machen (who preferred the term "orthodox" over the term "fundamentalist" because he perceived the *intention* of the focus on the fundamental doctrines of scripture as simply a *restatement* of the most important elements of historic creedal orthodoxy in the face of theological modernism) thus spoke out against his denomination's acceptance of the ordination of women and was subsequently defrocked. Luther challenged the Roman Catholic doctrine of papal infallibility and the elevation of tradition above Scripture and was likewise excommunicated.

Fifth, Sorenson never presents a valid solution to the contention that the language of the KJV is often difficult to *understand*. This author has met numerous people who for various reasons legitimately *need* an updated KJV. Many fundamentalists who would deny that they hold to a "Ruckmanite" view of scripture have an almost "Ruckmanite" disdain for even a simple updating, in the KJV text, of archaic words and word usage. Many opponents of the KJV use this valid need for non-archaic words as their primary argument to promote modern translations such as the NIV. This causes KJV defenders to ignore this very real problem because of the *association* of the need for an updated translation with the promotion of modern versions based on a faulty text and a faulty translation methodology. The baby is thrown out with the proverbial bath water. Rather, pro-KJV fundamentalists would do well to consider a conservative updating of the *language* of the KJV that respects *all* the syntactical categories of the KJV (e.g. the differentiation in person evidenced in *thee / you* and *thou / ye*.) Perhaps the greatest factor leading fundamentalist lay people away from the KJV and its defense to the NKJV, the NIV, the NASB and others is the resistance of many pro-KJV fundamentalist pastors and teachers to making the KJV more clear by supporting the need for updating archaic words, leaving lay people with three options:

- 1) Read the KJV and be confused by every archaic word or idiom (a Ruckmanite-type refusal to allow the text of the KJV to be altered *at all*).
- 2) Use a dictionary or a glossary of archaic word (a concession to #1 that can be very cumbersome when one is having his personal devotional time).
- 3) Read a modern version either by itself or along with the KJV (a concession to Warfield).

I suggest a fourth option, one that is not popular among many fundamentalist defenders of the KJV (for mysterious reasons): update the archaic words themselves in the text of the KJV, as is done in the KJ21. The integrity of Scripture is magnified thereby, not hindered.

Jonathan A. Whitmer (BA in Bible with minor in Biblical languages from Pensacola Christian College; MA in Linguistics from Baptist Bible Translators Institute)