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And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth;

2 Timothy 2:24-25

IN MEMORIAM - THEODORE P. LETIS AN ATHANASIOUS OF OUR TIMES

It is said of the early churchman, Athanasius, that he was a fierce defender of the truths of Holy Scripture. It was his tenacity and that of those fellow churchman who debated the vital doctrine of the Trinity at the Council of Nicea in the summer of 325 A.D., and formulated a thoroughly Biblical definition of the person of Christ. The Athanasian Creed has thus since stood as a doctrinal guidepost to generations of Christians. We are allowed some historical record of the courage of one young Athanasius, archdeacon from Alexandria, who skillfully and ferociously argued a minority orthodox position that Jesus was "very God of Very God, begotten, not created." The inevitable compromisers confronted the young theologian with the fact that he stood alone, that he was fighting a losing battle, that the whole world was against him. "The fiery African threw back his shoulders and his dark eyes flashed. He said quietly, 'Is the world against Athanasius? Then Athanasius is against the world.'¹

The same unswerving stand for truth exemplified by Athanasius reminds me of the singular stand for truth characterized by the life and work of the late Theodore P. Letis, Ph.D. Dr. Letis was born of humble beginnings, brought to initial knowledge of salvation in Christ through the charismatic movement in the 1970's, and Providentially brought under the tutelage of a gentle giant of the faith in his own time, Dr. Edward F. Hills. Under Hills, Letis became a champion of the historic Reformation text of the Bible. Endowed with a brilliant mind, Letis quickly grasped the enormity of the textual issue along with it's complexities through those valuable years under Hills. Dr. Hills carefully and patiently helped Letis to understand the truths of Reformed doctrine in the light of the scriptures. Letis later became a Lutheran (Missouri Synod) as his keen sense of historical perspective formed his faith through the writings of Augustine, Luther, and Calvin.

One cannot say precisely when it was that the Spirit of God called a young Ted Letis to pursue a career as a church historian and an apologist for the Reformation texts of the Bible. Certainly it was prior to his having met Dr. Hills, for it was an already stimulated Christian intellect that pursued an early engagement with Dr. Hills. Ted's mission was already on course.

¹ David Otis Fuller, ed., *Treasury of Evangelical Writings*. (Grand Rapids: IBTS, 1996). In his book published originally titled as, "Valiant For The Truth", Dr. David Otis Fuller describes his collated symposium of his giants of the faith as a collection of men utterly driven by their love for God, his Son, his Word to a point of "reckless abandonment of their lives in passionate service for His Son, Jesus Christ . . . These were indeed giant intellects who bowed their wills and their hearts in childlike submission to a sovereign God" The biographical sketch of the renown church father, Athanasius, describe a person utterly sold out for the objective truth of God's Word.

Dr. Edward F. Hills, a trained textual critic with credentials from the elite halls of educational institutions² who was also a sincere believer in Jesus Christ and to whom was gifted the heart of a pastor and teacher, was to become the mentor of the young Letis. The impact of Hills' guidance became evident as Ted embarked upon a long and arduous educational journey. A journey centered in the requisite for proper academic training and focused on a vision for defending the faith once delivered to the saints echoed in history as *Sola Scriptura*. Ted's journey was also extraordinarily productive in terms of articles and papers surrounding the issues of biblical criticism. Ted's course of training included a B.A. in Biblical Studies and History from Evangel College. He continued his education in a masters program at Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia) and completed his masters at Emory University earning an M.T.S. (magna cum laude) in American Church History. Ted went on to earn his Ph.D. in Ecclesiastical History from the University of Edinburgh, Scotland.

Throughout Ted's educational journey he developed, wrote, and honed an organized and articulate *apologia* for the Biblical text of the Protestant tradition. The result was a brilliant collection of articles and lectures that won acclaim from academia as fresh, well written arguments from meticulously documented historical and academic sources. Always writing as a church historian, Ted consistently kept in check the ignorance of the post-modern Christian mind with the objective truth of a Holy Scripture that is evidenced in an historic purview governed by a true, Providential, and Covenantal God. An example of the skill of Letis as an historian is found in the following example from one of his classic articles, "Hugh Broughton Redivivus: An Appraisal of Jack P. Lewis's 'The Doctrinal Problems with the King James Version.' "

The task of evaluating bibles is arduous and complex. Not only are the various translations produced from within the framework of certain value criteria, but the individuals evaluating have their own value criteria, and a lack of coalescence is inevitable at some point. For example, Lewis believes that vernacular translation work should benefit those outside the believing community, and he is not alone in this regard. However, the problem enters in his evaluation when he assumes that his perspective on this a "given," an assumed axiom that everyone is (or should be) governed by. He maintains that "The message of the Bible should not be the peculiar possession . . . of those initiated and trained in the church" (Jack P. Lewis, *The English Bible from the KJV to NIV: A History and Evaluation*, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981, p. 40). Yet there is a substantial segment of the historical Protestant Church that believes the Bible is just that: The covenant document of believers, (James Daane, "Converting by Translating," *Reformed Journal* Vol. 29, February 1979, pp. 2-3) not evangelistic material. . . . Others have expressed similar sentiments on this issue. Who is correct? Ultimately, this will be determined along theological lines, but the unexpecting reader of Lewis' "History and Evaluation" expects objective criteria for determining first the philosophical rationale for translations . . . and then the criteria for what is proper translation. The situation becomes even more complex when it is realized that Lewis participated in the production of a contemporary rival to the AV, the New International Version; hence he is hardly intellectually and emotionally detached in the evaluation.³

Ted's ultimate skill was his ability to communicate, both in writing and in lecture, the often knotty aspects of the textual debate with peers and laymen alike. His knowledge was specialized and vast, his vocabulary unequivocal, and his encyclopedic mind always able to pull up Biblical and academic resources at will. For the Christian who honestly sought to learn the issue Ted was like a shot of pure oxygen. Many thousands of Christians befuddled by the attacks of neo-orthodoxy were edified in their

² Edward Freer Hills was a distinguished Latin and Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Yale University. He also earned the B.D. degree from Westminster Theological Seminar (Philadelphia) and the Th.M. degree from Columbia Theological Seminary. After doing doctoral work at the University of Chicago in New Testament text criticism, Hills completed his doctoral program at Harvard University, earning the Th.D. in this field. He is the author of *The King James Version Defend and Believing Bible Study* (Christian Research Press).

³ Theodore P. Letis, ed., *The Majority Text: Essays and Reviews in the Continuing Debate*, (Philadelphia/Edinburgh: IRRBS, 2000), pp. 71-72.

faith because of Ted's work. Others, blinded by the *homo mensura*⁴ philosophy of our age and schooled in the popular approach to biblical belief, often recoiled in rage in the face of Letis's seamless biblical rationale and logic.

Ted Letis would not back down from firmly deduced biblical and theological convictions. If one were to identify the core of his convictions, Ted's brilliant paper, "The Protestant Dogmaticians and the Late Princeton School on the Status of the Sacred *Apographa*,"⁵ might be referenced as a source. The work that produced perhaps the most critical praise from Ted's peers was his paper, "B. B. Warfield, Common-Sense Philosophy and Biblical Criticism," for it was here that the keen eye of the historian observed a subtle, but important shift in the use of theological terms. Letis explodes the false aura of the term "inerrancy" which conveniently replaced the more nuanced theological term "infallible" by the renowned B. B. Warfield as he sought to shift the understanding of verbal inspiration away from the old Protestant Scholastic view.

Warfield was the first from Princeton to break so decisively with the old text standard. He did so with the confidence that a far better text was then emerging.

Nevertheless, to abandon this standard meant he would be abandoning the text thought to be verbally inspired by the divines who produced the Westminster Confession of Faith. In order to save, therefore, his verbal view of inspiration – the last vestige of Francis Turretin's influence – he was forced to now relegate inspiration to the inscrutable autographs of the biblical records.

These, he now also argued, when once reconstructed, would be inerrant in a way which far surpassed the text thought by the Westminster divines to be inspired. Contrary to most critical evaluations of Warfield, the primary influence on him at this point was not Reformed scholasticism, but rather the Enlightenment.⁶

Perhaps a high point of Ted's career came in May of 2003 in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Here, Dr. Theodore P. Letis lectured on "The Quest for the Historical Text," with a lively lecture that demonstrated in well documented fashion the inextricable connection between textual criticism and higher criticism. Dr. Letis arranged for a timely special reprint (by permission) of Dr. Jakob van Bruggen's "The Future of the Bible." An important duo of workshop lectures were included in the weekend conference that keyed on the Dead Sea Scroll Collection at the Grand Rapids Van Andel Museum. The workshops, held at the Prince Conference Center at Calvin College, were titled, "John W. Burgon: Rescued, Resuscitated, and Reconsidered," and the second workshop, "Edward Freer Hills: The Life and Times of a 20th Century Burgonian." Through these lectures well over 650 people were treated to the mind and passion of Dr. Letis. The totality of his skill and experience were played out through that conference.

These musings are but scraps in the scope of the work of Theodore P. Letis. To have known him, worked with him, and perhaps glimpsed a little bit of his phenomenal character and energy was a unique privilege of but few people. I am one of those few. I first came to know and love Ted as a fellow defender of God's Word in a conference held in Grand Rapids in 1983. Ted was a steady champion of the faith in all the years that I knew him. We initially met through Dr. David Otis Fuller when Ted was a

⁴ R. C. Sproul, *Willing To Believe*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997) p.17. "Man is the measure."

⁵ Theodore P. Letis, "The Protestant Dogmaticians. . .," in Letis ed., *The Ecclesiastical Text: Text Criticism, Biblical Authority and the Popular Mind* (Philadelphia/Edinburgh: The Institute for Renaissance and Reformation Biblical Studies, 2000).

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5. Letis continues: "The true test for determining whether one is an heir of the Reformed scholastics is found in the role the Westminster confession plays in locating final Scriptural authority. Archibald Alexander (1772-1851), Charles Hodges (1797-1878), and the Southern Presbyterian, Robert Dabney (1820-1890) were genuine heirs of Turretin. They focused authority in present, extant copies of the biblical texts (apographa), withal the accompanying textual phenomena, as the "providentially preserved" and sanctioned edition (Westminster Confession of Faith, 1:8)."

budding masters student at Westminster. We became better acquainted through conferences and collaborating on publishing projects as he completed his masters work at Emory. Later, he was my personal tour guide when I visited him during his doctoral studies at Edinburgh. No one has had a better guide to a history of the English Reformation. I relish the memory of the journey of Ted's life that I was allowed to know.

Ted would surely never allow himself to be compared to a giant of the faith as Athanasius. But, it can be said of Ted Letis as it was said of Athanasius, "We have seldom an opportunity of observing either in active or speculative life, what effect may be produced, or what obstacles may be surmounted by the force of a single mind, when it is inflexibly applied to the pursuit of a single object."⁷ I have seen good men waiver in the heat of spiritual battle. I have felt my own knees quake, and have known my own weak thoughts and fears; but, I can say that in 22 years of knowing Ted Letis that he never changed or waffled in his stance for the text and our English Bible. He consistently defended the scriptures and in a most honorable manner. His zeal and his tenacity were unmatched as was his intellect and ability to understand the scope of this divine doctrinal debate. He was singularly the most misunderstood and underappreciated servant of the Lord that I have known. I know he was all but mentally and emotionally tortured by neglect of the church at large. The abject apathy of the church toward the Holy and loving Word of God was a source of both terrible frustration for Ted and a source of motivation to keep on teaching the church. Despite it all Ted NEVER changed or wavered. He was truly a man "utterly sold out for the Word of God." What a man! Always valiant for the truth.

To the memory of our dear friend in Christ, Theodore P. Letis – may the victory chant in heaven's glory declare around the feet of our Savior – *Sola Gratia, Sola Fide, Sola Scriptura*.

Russell H. Spees
Grand Rapids
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Editors Note: On the evening of June 24, 2005, Dr. Theodore P. Letis, 53, was taken home to heaven as a result of an automobile accident near his home in Stone Mountain, Georgia. He leaves his wife Susan, daughter Grace, and son Ted. May the Lord comfort and uphold these and all who grieve the loss of our brother.

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⁷ David Otis Fuller, ed., *Treasury of Evangelical Writings*. (Grand Rapids: IBTS, 1996), p. 16.