

## THE ENCHIRIDION

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**Editor:** In honor of a friend and colleague now in heaven with our Saviour, we are pleased to present a reprint of an earlier issue of our periodic journal. As we observe the sixth year of our loss of Theodore P. Letis, Sr., Ph.D., since June 24, 2005 it is fitting in this 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of the publishing of the King James Version that we rehearse the research that Dr. Letis so ably put forward.

Likewise fitting is that a friend of Dr. Letis introduce this poignant article. Dr. J. D. Watson is a pastor, Bible teacher, author and lecturer. We first met Dr. Watson at the Dead Sea Scroll Conference held in Grand Rapids. Later, we became better acquainted as Dr. Watson presented a timeless lecture series on the *Five Solas of the Reformation*, here in Grand Rapids. Dr. Watson has two recently published books by AMG Publishers titled, *A Word for the Day, Key Words from the New Testament*, and *A Hebrew Word for the Day, Key Words from the Old Testament*.  
- R. Spees

### Introduction by J. D. Watson, Th.D.

Never will I forget the very first communication I had with Dr. Theodore Letis. My office telephone rang one morning in 2001, Dr. Letis identified himself (much to my surprise), and then said, “I stumbled onto your website and read your essay, ‘Defending the Words of God.’ I just had to call and thank you for ‘getting me.’” He was referring to my quotations of him concerning the use of the term “inerrant” in the context of textual studies, as well as the issue of the autographs vs. the apographs (i.e., the originals vs. the copies). He went on to explain that his thanks stemmed from the fact that he was often misunderstood, misrepresented, and misquoted.

Now, my “getting” Dr. Letis was in no way due to my cleverness but his clarity. As I read His book, *The Ecclesiastical Text*, and then did my own research to see “whether those things were so” (Acts 17:11), I was no less than amazed—the historical realities he recounts could not be clearer. He makes his case with unimpeachable evidence and therefore reaches inarguable conclusions.

Since then I have often been appalled when I hear someone attack Dr. Letis with some venomous statement, such as, “He doesn’t even believe in biblical inerrancy!” Such an accusation flows either from innocent ignorance at best or deliberate dishonesty at worst, for Dr. Letis, in point of fact, believed in a

doctrine that is not only far stronger but actually historical. Instead of the innovative, unhistorical, and diluted term *inerrancy* (an astronomical term, not a theological term), he believed in *infallibility*, which was held by such giants of the faith as Francis Turretin, the Westminster divines, and Charles Hodge.

The work of that great 17<sup>th</sup> century theologian Turretin, for example, was so important that not only did Hodge but also another great theologian, Robert L. Dabney, made his *Institutes* mandatory reading for their students. Turretin strongly maintained that while versions “may be exposed to errors and admit of corrections [they] nevertheless are authentic as to the doctrine they contain (which is divine and infallible)” (*Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, [P&R Publishing, 1992], Vol. 1, 125–126). Elsewhere he makes an even stronger case for extant manuscripts: “By the original texts we do not mean the autographs written by the hand of Moses, or the prophets, and the apostles, which certainly do not now exist. We mean their apographs, which are so called because they set forth to us the Word of God in the very words of those who wrote under the immediate inspiration of the Holy Spirit” (p. 106). So, it was *infallibility of existing texts* that Turretin defended as the originals. Not once in over 2,000 pages of his *Institutes* do we find the word “inerrant.”

The Westminster divines were equally unambiguous when they declared that the Scriptures, “being immediately inspired by God, and, by His singular care and providence [were] kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentic” (*Westminster Confession*, 1.8). The divines clearly stated that they considered the copies handed down through the ages to be the preserved, genuine, pure, and uncorrupted Word of God. They also wrote that those Scriptures are “the infallible rule of interpretation” (1.9) and are the “assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority” (1.5). Again, not a hint of so-called “inerrancy.”

As Dr. Letis conclusively proved in his years of research, it was B. B. Warfield who, almost single-handedly, changed the entire landscape of biblical studies. In fact—and this is crucial to understand—he totally reinterpreted what the Westminster divines had written. Commenting on 1.8 of the Confession quoted above, Warfield wrote in 1891: “The Confession asserts that final appeal in all controversies is to be made to the *original* Hebrew and Greek Scriptures, which are *alone* safeguarded in their accuracy by Divine inspiration, and it asserts that these *originals* have been, ‘by His singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages’” [“Westminster Doctrine of Holy Scripture” in *Selected Shorter Writings of B. B. Warfield*, (P & R Publishing, 1970, 1973), Vol. II, 569, emphasis added].

“What’s wrong with that?” we might ask. Only that the Confession had *never* been interpreted that way in its 245 year history. As Dr. Letis writes of Warfield’s “ingenious new

interpretation” of the Confession, that “which had once taught the providential *preservation* of the extant Church texts, was now used to affirm the providential *restoration* of an inerrant original text, by means of modern text criticism” (*The Ecclesiastical Text*, p. 22, emphasis in the original). History totally vindicates Letis’ observation, despite his detractors. Before Warfield’s reinterpretation, the Confession had *always* referred to already existing Greek texts as being inspired, *not just the autographs*. Warfield’s reinterpretation of the Confession, in fact, is now mimicked by virtually every evangelical today in virtually every doctrinal statement, such as: “We believe the Bible is inspired by God and inerrant in the original manuscripts,” or even worse, “We believe the Bible is verbally and plenary inspired, in the original manuscripts.” As in other areas of Christianity today, here is another instance of our abandonment of our historical faith.

So, what did Warfield’s efforts produce? By adopting the term “inerrant,” he succeeded in replacing the *reality* of the “infallible copies” that we *do* have with the *illusion* of the “inerrant originals” that we will *never* have. How did this happen? It was The Enlightenment (1648–1789) that birthed an era in which *reason* alone reigned supreme, replacing even *revelation*, and one of the first casualties was the doubting of the historical text of Scripture. Led by a horde of German rationalists (Bengel, Griesbach, Semler, Tregelles, etc.), lower (textual) criticism—which actually came before and spawned the full-blown higher (historical) criticism—rejected the historic (providentially preserved) text and went in search of the “authentic text,” which could only be discovered by reason, not revelation. So persuasive were they, in fact, that even a great defender of the faith like Warfield was swayed.

I was, therefore, greatly honored when asked to introduce the essay that follows from the pen of a man who was not swayed by the new, the novel, and the natural. God, in His sovereign providence, chose to take Dr. Letis home to glory, obviously because he had “finished [his] course” (2 Tim. 4:7). He left behind, however, a historic body of work—in the tradition of John Burgon and Edward Hills—that must not be ignored by anyone who desires to be truly objective on the issues of textual criticism and Bible translation. With this essay, our dear brother honestly answers his critics. We only hope they will be honest in return. 📖

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## *The Evangelical Quest for the Historical Text and the Jesus Seminar* ©Theodore P. Letis, 2003

**W**hen Jesus told the religious leaders in Jerusalem that when they destroyed the temple He would raise it up in three days, He was misunderstood. He spoke of the temple of His body, but when the religious leaders brought Him before the political powers, their claim was that He intended the literal temple in Jerusalem. Whether this was a deliberate misrepresentation on the part of His critics, or the result of their simple lack of a capacity to understand His mode of speech, the Biblical narrative does not state. That His meaning was missed and used to His disadvantage is what we are intended to contemplate.

This essay is an exercise in dispelling the many misconceptions stated about me and my views on the subjects of the composition and transmission of the Greek text of the N.T. These erroneous views attributed to me may be the result of pure institutional politics, or they may just be the result of cross-community misunderstanding. I am a Lutheran, and all my critics to date have been fundamentalist Baptists. In either case the results are the same: the dissemination of misinformation both about me and my views. This misinformation is currently found in audio, video, printed media, and on the Internet, all of which have appeared since I was invited, a few years back, to speak at a conservative private Christian college, where I shared the results of my twenty years of research on the subjects noted above. If the misrepresentation is merely the result of a discontinuity of point of reference, or because of a lack on the part of my critics to grasp my argumentation and data, I believe the Christian ethic requires of me to be “patient, apt to teach.” Furthermore, it is particularly important for me to take this posture for the sake of those following the course of these events with a view to arriving at a more accurate understanding of the subjects under treatment. Hence, what follows is an exercise in clarification predicated on the assumption that I have been misunderstood, rather than purposely misrepresented.

In my endeavor to clarify what I have said in my oral presentations and in what I have written, I shall refer nearly exclusively to my own book, *The Ecclesiastical Text: Text Criticism, Biblical Authority and the Popular Mind* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.

(Philadelphia: The Institute for Renaissance and Reformation Biblical Studies, 2000) for the material that I believe will serve me well in setting the record straight regarding my views. Because my book is comprised of a collection of separate essays, all of which appeared previously in various academic journals and magazines, one really must work rather hard, I must confess, to arrive at the synthesis within the book that I am certain does exist. As editor, I did align the essays in a logical sequence, each essay building upon another. Unfortunately, however, my critics have chosen to take disparate portions of the essays and arrive at conclusions that are utterly unwarranted in light of the collection as a whole (and at times unwarranted even by the immediate context). Hence, much of my work will involve my pointing my critics to those portions of my book that unequivocally arrest all misconceptions, if not in the minds of the intransigent perhaps, no doubt certainly in the mind of the more detached reader.

Let me state in the broadest terms possible the thesis of my book, as well as a few attendant sub-themes. [First,] believing communities, since the recognition and reception of the Judeo-Christian canon, have always defended the text of Scripture in its extant state, and never, until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, did anyone begin to make exclusive appeal to the autographic form of these texts, which no longer exist, as alone final. Furthermore, this allegiance to the extant text is demonstrable, I maintain, from the apostolic era until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Appeal was always to the statements of Scripture first for support of this belief, as well as to the *regula fide* of the early post-apostolic community for certainty that Scripture was both verbally inspired, as well as faithfully preserved, in the sanctioned transmitted copies.

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[Second,] with the arrival of the science of textual criticism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, this locus of authority was shifted amongst the orthodox—primarily in the person and work of B. B. Warfield at Princeton Seminary—to exclusively the autographic form of these texts as alone possessing final authority. This took the onus off the need

to defend the extant text and redirected attention to defending a non-existent, theoretical autographic form of the text. The reason I use the word theoretical is because no one can see these autographs to know how they read. Furthermore, these theoretical autographs are deemed “inerrant” (by post-Enlightenment modern 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century definitions). I put “inerrant” in quotes because this, too, was an innovation, since this is not a theological term but one taken from astronomy during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Traditionally, believing communities always referred to the absolute infallibility of the transmitted text. They never made appeal to the inerrancy of the autographic text. My thesis is that this adjustment was both a defection from the historic view of Biblical authority, as well as a defective and overly optimistic alliance with science as an ally of the faith, which, it was believed, would restore this now lost “original.”

[Third,] this change from “existing text” defense to “original text” defense was also fraught with theological implications. Traditional tenets of the Christian faith are invariably brought under fresh scrutiny in this new shift. Theology is substantially affected by this new “quest for the historical (original) text,” because one must now assume—it is not an option—the existing text has been tampered with in a substantial way in transmission from the autographs. That is, if the text that exists has been substantially corrupted so that we must vest ultimate authority only in the original form, then the theology derived from the existent text is now also logically called into question at various points. As the title of Bruce Metzger’s important handbook makes clear in the very title: *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*. (3<sup>rd</sup> ed. OUP, 1992.)

This is an unavoidable implication for the late “original text only” defense, which is not a little ironic for fundamentalists who espouse this modern theory. In their misplaced confidence in science’s ability to re-pristiniate an “inerrant” original, they have inadvertently opened the door to call into question the certainty of various tenets of the Christian Faith itself as traditionally found in the “corrupt” extant text of the Bible! Also, another unacknowledged implication is that the discipline of lower criticism is now also invested with the authority to “reconstruct” this original, a discipline that its own practitioners admit is anything but a true science.

Hence, the so-called Jesus Seminar has made radical claims about what can and cannot be believed about what Jesus did and taught. This is based first of all on the uncertainty of the existing text, the same premise from which fundamentalists begin in their “quest for the original text.” The Jesus Seminar just comes up with a different version of the “original” than do the fundamentalists, but the premise is the same: the existing text is corrupt and the orthodox Church was responsible. Warfield was the first confessional Reformed academic to make this claim and fundamentalists influenced by him, on his quest for the “original text,” naturally enough deny that this is the case, as would Warfield, but the denial is arbitrary—the facts speak for themselves. Let the Jesus Seminar explain:

“The search for the real Jesus begins with a modern critical edition of the Greek New Testament. . . . In spite of all these amazing discoveries [within the discipline of N.T. text criticism], the stark truth is that the history of the Greek gospels, from their creation in the first century until the discovery of the first copies of them at the beginning of the third, remains largely unknown and therefore unmapped. The establishment of a critical Greek text of the gospels is only the beginning of the detective work. To unravel the mysteries of the nearly two centuries that separate Jesus from the earliest surviving records, scholars have had to examine the gospels with minute care and develop theories to explain what appears to be a network of complex relationships.” (*The Five Gospels: A Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*, The Jesus Seminar [New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1993], 8–9).

Hence, what I have been saying for many years now is certainly true: the first step in the quest for the historical *Jesus*, is the quest for the historical *text*, begun by Warfield. Prior to Warfield’s day, confessional folk implicitly relied on the judgment of the post apostolic church to account for that gap and for the resultant, transmitted form of the Greek N.T. The Jesus Seminar scholars make clear, as did Warfield before them, that what they wanted was not the text of the Church—which they no longer trusted—but a “scholar’s” text:

“[This] Scholar’s Version is free of ecclesiastical and religious control, unlike other major translations into English, including the King James Version. . . . The Scholar’s Version is authorized by scholars. . . . The

appearance of the version authorized by King James in 1611 continued and advanced the tradition of translations into English, and it also put the English Church on a firm political and cultural footing. The King James Version helped to canonize Shakespearean English as the literary norm for English speaking people everywhere. It also united English speakers worldwide (*The Five Gospels*, xviii–xvii).

The Jesus Seminar [advocates] know that it is the ecclesiastical decisions made by the Nicean Church regarding the sanctioned form of the Greek N.T.—what John Burgon was happy to call the “Traditional Text”—that they are consciously and deliberately countering (as found in the Authorized Version) with their own scholar’s text. Again, Warfield was the first to give permission to traditional Calvinists to engage in this initial quest, and it was he who openly advocated the first “scholar’s text” and so by-passed the A.V. and the early ecclesiastical textual decisions that the Jesus Seminar now wants to replace with its own. That Warfield is lionized by a generation that neither appreciates the damage he accomplished, nor his contribution to the Jesus Seminar, is an indictment on contemporary Evangelicals (and those who consider themselves the “truly Reformed”) that they can little appreciate much less remedy. 📖

### About the Author

The late Theodore P. Letis, Sr. was the leading academic proponent for the traditional texts in the tradition of E. F. Hills and J. W. Burgon. Dr. Letis earned a Ph.D. from the University of Edinburgh in Ecclesiastical History and an honors M.T.S. (*magna cum laude*) from Emory University in American Church History. His essays have appeared in journals such as, *The Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*, *Christian Arena*, *Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society*, *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology*, *Reformation*, *The Churchman*, and *The Journal of Higher Criticism*. He has authored and edited several books including: *The Majority Text: Essays and Reviews in the Continuing Debate* (1987, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2000). *The Ecclesiastical Text: Text Criticism, Biblical Authority and the Popular Mind*, (2000 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), and *A New Hearing for the Authorized Version* (Grand Rapid: IBTS, 2003 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.).



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