

**Theodore P. Letis**

10 June, 1998

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Dear Dr. Wisdom,

Your letter reached me on the day I left for Great Britain to attend, ironically, a by-invitation conference on the text criticism of the Greek Bible, both testaments. In attendance were Bruce Metzger, J.K. Elliott, J. Neville Birdsall, Tjitze Baarda, Bart Ehrman, Michael Welte (of the Münster Institute), Jakob van Bruggen (who, along with myself, was the sole representative of the Ecclesiastical Text position present at this meeting) and several others, and it proved to be a truly remarkable occasion.

Hence, while I received several e-mails from friends while in England and later while in Edinburgh asking a reply from me to your letter on the internet, I was a bit frustrated that I could not attend to your well written and thoughtful letter until I returned. I have now returned and while still a bit jet-lagged, I want to get off to you a quick reply which your important letter merits.

While the letter was primarily addressed to Dr. Horton, several comments were directed to me personally and so it will be to those comments I will now primarily attend.

The tone of the letter was fraternal and pleasantly engaging and so while I do not know any of the faculty at Bob Jones University (and I must admit that in truth I know little about the institution other than what I have gleaned in the press over the years and the rather well known association of Ian Paisley with your University), I am happy to reply in kind.

*textual criticism*

My name appears in your very first paragraph regarding the use of the term textual criticism. My position is that the enterprise to reconstruct the most primitive form of the Greek N.T. is in and of itself not only a vital and important enterprise, but that it is perfectly necessary for those interested in classical

studies, the historical method and, therefore, the academic discipline of text criticism proper. It is, indeed, a specialist subject and I believe it is the result of non-specialists using partial findings, or a less than professional grasp of this subject, that has caused problems for your institution as well as for myself, and to a large extent has also resulted in a misunderstanding of the stance of PCC. That is, those who are irresponsible and ill-informed have addressed this subject in an inflammatory and highly rhetorical manner, and so those who attempt to address, in a responsible manner, the many complicated issues involved in the text critical enterprise, are misunderstood on the popular level (the last and longest chapter of my book, *The Ecclesiastical Text*, referred to in your open letter, deals with this theme).

My reservations with the discipline, however, are two:

- 1) It has, at times, lacked the kind of humility necessary to take seriously the actual state of the data, which while being vast in terms of quantity, is, nevertheless, rather fragmentary, incomplete, even baffling at times, in terms of allowing text critics to understand the actual history of the development and transmission of the earliest form of the text to later recensional stages. This is a perennial complaint within the discipline itself to this very day, and was a theme raised again at the conference from which I just returned. It was for this reason, I believe, that the judicious Karl Lachmann, in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, confined himself to reconstructing the state of the text in the fourth century, believing this to be a much more attainable goal than the actual reconstruction of the most primitive form of the text (and here I purposely avoid the term "original" text because of all the additional questions it raises on its own, still being grappled with by text critics). Ironically, I believe this purely historical judgment was a result of his being not a theologian, but rather, a strict philologist. Hence, he was not impatient to be the first to "reconstruct the *original text*" for the Church. Rather, he wanted to provide a certain foundation for advancing the further job of eventually heading in the direction of the earliest evidence. Others, later in the century, who *were* churchmen, were less detached and so ran forward at a rather reckless pace so that much back tracking was needed early in our century.
- 2) The discipline has consistently failed, since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, to offer a *theological framework* for how to understand the practice of text criticism as performed on a sacred text, i.e. the Judeo-Christian Bible. The closest the discipline ever came to offering this was when Richard Bentley during the English Enlightenment, and the S.P Tregelles again in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, attempted to articulate what I call in my Ph.D. dissertation, the "ideology of

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harmless engagement," i.e. lower criticism never affects dogma. Warfield also attempted to place the enterprise within the over-all providential activity of God, but he badly distorted the 17<sup>th</sup> century orthodox confessional and dogmatic consensus in the process.

The first chapter of my book, which you confess you found unconvincing, treats this latter point in some detail. Hence, I suspect that you might also find a problem with my arguments and data for the earlier developments surrounding Bentley and Teggles, as found in my dissertation. Nevertheless, I take heart that a rather substantial group of text critics, historians and theologians have found my Warfield essay valid ( *cf.* my last appendix) and at least my Ph.D. committee found my dissertation convincing. Once it appears in its published form we shall have to see if the larger text critical and ecclesiastical history communities agree. I feel rather confident that they will.

Moreover, on the general issue of Biblical criticism, and in this case text criticism in particular, Brevard Childs and an entire phalanx of historians of Biblical interpretation (such as I consider myself to be) have expressed grave misgivings about the state of the Bible after the modern critical movement finished its work. The authors and titles of such critiques of "modernism," from within the ranks of critical thought itself (and here I have no reference at all to the quite separate debate among fundamentalists about the word "inerrancy," etc.), are legion and have resulted in the well defined movement known as "post-critical," or "post-liberal" thought. (Much of this movement can be traced to Yale Divinity School and the so-called "New Yale Theology" – see my chapter four on this point where I give none of these post-critical options complete endorsement but I suggest that this movement at least signals, as a backdrop, that the climate is right for thinking again in the direction that takes seriously a traditionally high view of Scripture as a sacred text.)

More specifically, within text critical ranks, J. K. Elliott and Eldon Jay Epp, whom I readily consider colleagues, and others, have been playing the gadfly in pointing out that for all of its claims for reconstructing a "new *textus receptus*" (or *standard text*), what the text critical community has actually succeeded in constructing--as important as it might be in terms of a workable and soon to be rather comprehensive *apparatus criticus*--is a scholar's text which finds no complete echo in any one N.T. MS ever discovered. In light of this development and context--and my comments here do not take the form of a moral judgment on my part, but merely a descriptive matter-of-fact assessment shared by many text critics--I place my own specific project of attempting to revive the 17<sup>th</sup> century orthodox *theological* view of the text. I might add that most within

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fundamentalist circles know next to nothing about this tradition, including James White. Hence, I have been misunderstood by those in these ranks as everything from a crypto-Roman Catholic, to a Barthian, to being an advocate of the very group whom I wrote the longest chapter in my book in order to refute! (“The Revival of the Ecclesiastical Text and the Claims of the Anabaptists.”)

It happens that my project seems to fit rather well with Dr. Horton’s and PCC’s desire to set an example from within their fundamentalist community for offering a *credible* defense of this textual tradition, as opposed to all the absurd and uninformed claims for it so very present in the extremist advocates of the old Anglican Bible (which advocates, with some exceptions, James White does a tolerable job of criticizing, *cf.* my appendix B). On this, I would ask you to, indeed, consider PCC a true ally in your common effort to lend sound and safe direction to those masses in a state of confusion as a result both of the purely academic enterprise of post-Enlightenment Biblical criticism--both the lower as well as the higher--and of the harmful claims of these aforementioned extremists. I trust this provides further insight on the short-hand comments made at the conference in reference to the enterprise of *textual criticism*.

### *Erasmus*

Yes, Erasmus did practice text criticism, but within a pre-critical age that confined his judgments to the Koine, or Ecclesiastical Text tradition. The same holds true for the Complutensian tradition in the main. This textual tradition is what I am saying needs to be reconsidered, as the canonical approach to hermeneutics, in a parallel development, also sees as appropriate (see my chapter 5 on this approach).

### *the layman’s intuitive sense*

With regard to the laity’s intuitive sense of Biblical authority, I think you will find that most laymen believe that ultimate Biblical authority resides in the extant Bible, in spite of all of its human foibles, rather than in Warfield’s rather convoluted and abstract paradigm which requires them to bifurcate between an *idealized* kind of Platonic form (“inerrant autographs”) and a form of the Bible that has *actually functioned as the sacred text* within believing communities for at least fifteen hundred years.

*early Princeton*

All of my comments about the early Princetonians were highlighted to show that Warfield's paradigm was, indeed, innovative. Your admission that A. Alexander admitted that errors of little consequence might have made it into the autographic copies serves to illustrate that you see my point. No later Warfieldian appeal to inerrant autographs is found in A. Alexander, thus demonstrating that Warfield's paradigm was, indeed, a later innovation, intended to address a different climate. This point, however, was invoked in your letter to suggest that because as an historian I used this data in this way, it must be my *own* position as well. That I pass no judgment on the early Princetonians' opinions about errors in the "original" can in no way be interpreted as a judgment on my part of their opinion. It is not the job of the historian to impose his own editorial remarks on his subject, nor on his readers. Here you want to shoot the messenger for bringing you this message. That I pass no judgment on the message is no indication that it is *my own* message. As you know, this is an argument from silence, as well as a clear *non sequitur*.

*fas est et ab hoste doceri*

Furthermore, my use of Briggs, Orr, Lindsay, Sandeen, Vander Stelt, Rogers/McKim, constituted a rather formidable array of historian-theologians, both from the 19<sup>th</sup> century as well as the 20<sup>th</sup> century; from Scotland, the Netherlands as well as America; all of whom, with one voice, demonstrated the historically innovative aspect of Warfield's inerrant autographic theory. My argument is that their analysis as *historians* of Warfield's twisting of the Westminster Confession was correct. But I also made equally clear that I felt that each one of them, in their turn, were *incorrect* in what they proposed as *theologians* in the place of what Warfield offered (*Ecclesiastical Text*, pp. 63-76). I regret that you did not catch this not-all-together-subtle distinction. I take the blame for this, however, since my book, being a collection of originally separate journal publications, does not lend itself readily to a smooth systematic read. The book requires the reader, perhaps unnecessarily, to work rather hard.

*Sandeen?*

A careful reading of my Warfield essay would show the use of many unpublished documents and manuscripts used to make my point that Warfield was the first to introduce the German method of N.T. text criticism to Princeton, an argument that Sandeen never made, hence in no way was my research dependent upon his earlier work at this stage. My research and arguments are

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quite fresh and original. Moreover, your biographical material on Sandeen, as well as the earlier material on Briggs, *et al.* has a wee bit of the *ad hominem* about it. I believe for the most part all of these men were sound historians, and nearly all of those within the guild of ecclesiastical historians, that I know, agree.

### **Balmer**

Balmer's evidence is neither massive nor compelling which is why I needed only to cite one example from his own array in order to show that it serves my cause rather than his own. I say let the academic community be the arbiter on this.

### ***infallibilitas***

To the provocative question "Do Drs. Johnson and Letis really believe that the in-hand texts are perfect," I will serve you a quote each from a text critic and an historian on this subject. Kurt Aland, who was both an astute historian as well as a text critic, said the following:

*...it is undisputed that from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century orthodoxy's doctrine of verbal inspiration assumed... [the] Textus Receptus. It was the only Greek text they knew, and they regarded it as the 'original' text (Ecclesiastical Text, p. 30).*

The world's leading authority on the golden era of Protestant orthodoxy, Richard Muller, elaborates on this theme:

*Turretin and other high and late orthodox writers argued that the authenticity and infallibility of Scripture must be identified in and of the apographa [existing copies], not in and of the lost autographa [lost original]. The autographa figure in Turretin's argument only insofar as they were in Hebrew and Greek and are, therefore, best represented quoad verba and quoad res in the extant Hebrew and Greek apographa [existing copies]. The issue raised by the Protestant scholastic discussion of the relationship of the autographa [lost original] and apographa [existing copies] is, in other words, one of linguistic continuity rather than one of verbal inerrancy. The orthodox do, of course, assume that the text is free of substantial error and, typically, view textual problems as of scribal origin, **but they mount their argument for authenticity and infallibility without recourse to a logical device like that employed by Hodge and Warfield** (Ecclesiastical Text, pp. 77-78).*

Your argument at this point is now with Muller and the 17<sup>th</sup> century orthodox divines.

Muller has *defined* for us what historic orthodoxy (which, historically, fundamentalists have attempted to perpetuate) understood as its self-conscious view of Biblical authority. Muller quite deliberately says, as did Aland, that for them it was not the lost original that was ultimately authoritative, but the ecclesiastically sanctioned existent copies (i.e. sanctioned by continuous use rather than by church decree, analogous with the canon and orthodox Christology).

In conclusion, may I say that the current climate certainly allows for individual communities to choose to abide by the Ecclesiastical Text, rather than exchange this for an ever-emerging critical text. Again, I say this without in any way taking away from the specialists' need to further the discipline as a perfectly legitimate enterprise, but it must be the *faith communities* that make the final judgment on such theological matters as canon/text, with all the insight the discipline can afford. I suggest that one of the largest historic orthodox traditions, the ancient Eastern Church, more or less made such a decision years ago (see my chapter "The Ecclesiastical Text *Redivivus?*"). Why not smaller communities that desire to be organically (not institutionally, of course) connected to the large stream of historic orthodox Christianity and the textual standards that served this community since at least the fourth century?

The problem arises when in a less than enlightened way, such communities are scorned by those whose appetite has been whetted by the historical method (i.e. use of the critical text), but who have no real comprehensive grasp of the fragmentary nature of its results, being outside of the discipline proper, and who have not the temperament to abide by that which was accepted in previous ages by everyone, everywhere and at all times. Hence, the *responsible*--and I stress that word--communities abiding by the Ecclesiastical Text are then forced into an unnatural posture of defensiveness, which, in turn, can be seen by some as an attack. We should strive to understand the two approaches and determine within such understanding to respect an option that while currently appearing to be a minority opinion, nevertheless, has a honorable, and if understood in a post-critical way, a compelling case to make.

### *summary*

In spite of the tensions that the extant Ecclesiastical Text poses, to surrender the *Orthodox* paradigm that accompanies it, in order to engage in Warfield's wholly modern and Enlightenment "quest for the historical, *inerrant* text," which contrary to Warfield's optimism, has not appeared in 200 years of searching, is

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what I believe Dr. Johnson means by “leaven.” That those to the left have seen this weakness in Warfield’s paradigm as permission to pursue any number of *neo-orthodox* options is not surprising; that those from the right, from within your own fundamentalist ranks, have used this same weakness to form a near cult around the A.V. is just another way to react to the same problem. Neither response, wrong as they both are, diminishes what is obvious to all groups involved: this paradigm is dead and spent.

Sincerely,

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