

Theodore Letis, *The Ecclesiastical Text: Text Criticism, Biblical Authority and the Popular Mind* (Philadelphia and Edinburgh: The Institute for Renaissance and Reformation Biblical Studies, 1997; 2nd. ed. 2000), xiv+232 pp., paperback. £13.95

The current crisis in evangelical scholarship has been the focus of a recent spate of theological and historical studies. David Wells' *No Place for Truth* (1993) was hailed by TIME as a 'stinging indictment of evangelicalism's theological corruption', and academics within the camp rushed to apportion blame. Consistent in their conclusions, if not in their methods, Mark Noll's *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (1994), Alister McGrath's *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity* (1994), and Os Guinness' *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds* (1995), each traced this failure to the eschatological and separatist legacy of Protestant fundamentalism.

Already revisionists have emerged. Theodore Letis, in *The Ecclesiastical Text*, has provided a series of articles and reviews which offer a probing and disturbing analysis of evangelicalism's current crisis. Its roots are not in twentieth-century fundamentalism, he claims, but in Erasmus' introduction of academic textual criticism into the church in the early sixteenth century.

It is this blurring of the distinction between academy and church which lies behind much of Letis' argument. Arguing that the Bible is the church's book, he does not deny the value of text criticism pursued independently of the church within the academy. What he does contest is the prevailing assumption that the academy should determine the text of Scripture which the church should receive.

The book's first essay, 'B.B. Warfield, Common-Sense Philosophy and Biblical Criticism', locates the paradigm shift in the Princeton tradition. Protestant dogmatists had until this point located *infallibility* in those original language texts in the church's contemporary possession - an infallible apograph. The Hodges, for example, admitted 'errors' in Scripture, but argued that they were canonical and consequently existed for a purpose. Warfield, however, argued that infallibility demanded *inerrancy*, and hence could not place ultimate authority in the errant extant manuscripts. In his responses to 'unbelieving scholarship' Warfield argued that Scripture's ultimate authority was located in the inerrant original text - an inerrant autograph which was impossible to recover.

Letis points to the longer Markan ending as evidence of this sea-change in evangelical thought. Neither the Hodges nor Warfield believed the longer ending was part of the text prepared by the gospel's original author. The Hodges nevertheless received it as canonical, and therefore part of sacred writ. Warfield claimed that if it was not part of the original, it was not part of sacred writ.

Letis argues that this is the cause of the evangelical decay. The Warfieldian quest for the original text has entailed a massive misunderstanding of canon and the function of the church in receiving and preserving that canon. Canon involves the final form of the Biblical documents - not their initial form. The current explosion in Bible publishing, he argues, is therefore both a cause and consequence of a crippling lack of respect for the Biblical text within that evangelical constituency which claims to take Biblical authority most seriously: 'Today these sacred texts must have none of the smell of the ancient Near-East upon them; they must be made to speak in an American colloquialism that offers neither a window to the transcendent, nor an entryway to the religious consciousness that animated the communities that composed, preserved and transmitted those materials as a sacred trust' (p. viii). The Bible becomes marketable, subject to the gimmicks of the advertising guru. Letis therefore argues for the separation of the church's text from the academy's reconstruction of autographs. Using the label 'post-critical', he adopts the canonical criticism of B.S. Childs with powerful effect.

As a series of essays and reviews published in various scholarly journals, there are one or two problems in typography - the footnotes are a little erratic, with different conventions being adopted in different essays. For the same reason, there is a little repetition between the essays, but the most serious problem is the lack of an index.

Letis is perhaps a little defensive about his work - no doubt realising that his recommendation of the Majority Text tradition will win him little academic credibility. Yet his work, robust and compelling, requires little defence. Well-written and beautifully produced, Letis' work offers a searing examination of the collapse of evangelical authority in the very area in which they take most pride. Those of us who belong to that movement would do well to take heed.

Crawford Gribben
Trinity College Dublin