

*The Ecclesiastical Text*

Philadelphia: Institute for Renaissance and Reformation Biblical Studies, 1997

by Theodore P. Letis

Reviewed by Professor Ron Minton 1998

**INTRODUCTION**

This book, which Letis published as the director of the "Institute," is an attempt to show the traditional New Testament text is to be preferred to the critical text. Only a short review will be needed to show some strengths and weaknesses. The burden of the book is a plea for Christians to reject (1) the idea of inerrant autographs (which he says is a theory invented by B.B. Warfield), (2) the practice of textual criticism (which can never retrieve the lost autographs), and (3) modern opinions (whether in favor of the Critical Text or the Majority Text). Letis' solution is for believers to go back to the ecclesiastical text. By this he means a form of the Textus Receptus which he never publicly identifies. He is not a Majority Text advocate.

The book is composed of eight essays, most of which Letis read or wrote for publication earlier, and four book reviews. Two Appendices are included. The first is made up of private reviews of chapters one and four. The second is Letis' reviews of James White's *The King James Only Controversy* and Gail Riplinger's *New Age Versions*. These two books are favorites for the critical text and KJV respectively and Letis is against both. Some of Letis' shortcomings in his reviews will be noted below.

Ted Letis is to be commended for his work. There will be few careful readers who do not learn something. Especially valuable were many significant quotations from Protestants of the

sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These were presented to show the understanding of inspiration and preservation in that period.

### **GENERAL WEAKNESSES**

The book has several general weaknesses that seriously detract from its value. There is no bibliography and occasionally footnotes do not have adequate information on sources used. A book of this nature must have a bibliography. There are no Scripture or subject indices. There is no author index which is also a must in a book of this kind. Since Letis does discuss certain manuscripts, a manuscript index is also needed. There is no abbreviation list in the front. Many general readers will likely read the book and while Letis does not overuse abbreviations, those like *HTR* need to be listed. Despite those problems, Letis does employ around 440 footnotes and many contain excellent additional sources for those interested.

In much of the book Letis is promoting a form of the TR and a translation like the KJV. Many "fundamentalists" would agree with his conclusions. However, they might gasp at the "liberals" he uses to support his views (see pp. 29, 80, 216 ff.). In his efforts to build his case, he sometimes reverts to straw arguments (pp. 16, 21, 46, 56, etc.). Some will be mentioned below.

The greatest weakness of Letis' book is that he simplifies and explains away textual issues that are as real as the Bible itself. He does not see a problem with God's book not being inerrant or perfect as did Spurgeon and others (pp. 22, 40, 44, 72, etc.). Also he has a false and naive view of history (pp. 28, 35, 141) that he pretends is the correct view. Also Letis uses double talk on occasions. For example, he clearly defines the ecclesiastical text as "Byzantine, Traditional, Majority, Koine." Yet he goes to pains to discredit the work of the Majority Text advocates, apparently because they still continue to work at textual difficulties within the

Majority Text itself. It is as if Letis believes God has magically preserved a perfect TR when He has not. Letis does not face real problems. He seems to hope no one will notice. For example, he never offers examples and or solutions when the Majority text is divided, when the TR follows the Critical text, and when the ecclesiastical text is abandoned by the KJV. These simple oversights are enough to negate his entire purpose because Letis likes to paint an ivory palace where thorns and difficulties actually exist. Hiding one's head in the sand does not help anyone. This is the same problem found within most of the modern KJVO movement.

In Chapter One Letis tries to show that B.B. Warfield is the real culprit for making his "inerrant autograph" theories. However, Letis' argument is a straw attempt. He does not grapple with real textual differences. A typical example is found on page six. Letis quotes Archibald Alexander, early Princeton professor, as admitting errors could be in the autographs and it would be no problem. Alexander said "it is even possible that some of the autographs . . . might not be free from such errors as arise from the slip of the pen." Letis tries to build his case that the existing traditional text is to be preferred and that textual studies will have little value. Letis exaggerates "if the extant text manifested errors, the likelihood was strong that they were there originally."

Not only does Letis allow for errors in the autographs, the very words God gave (and this is the premise of his whole book - there is nothing special about the autographs, it is the ecclesiastical text that is infallible), he ignores the real problem. True, there is "no radical discontinuity between the lost autographs and the text he had before him," but the text Letis has before him is a defective text. It contradicts the ecclesiastical text, as Letis himself defines it, and it certainly contradicts the KJV and NKJV, the two leading translations that are from a similar text to what Letis prefers. None of these texts are "perfect" (a term Letis avoids) because

all differ from each other and from all extant traditional text manuscripts. Letis' view of the originals is in great contrast to historic Christianity. Spurgeon said (before Warfield) the originals could not have error because "the God who gave them cannot err."

### **CONCLUSION**

Letis failed in his attempt to show that the TR is the best and only reliable text. He put tradition over sound doctrine. He would not face the facts.