

Sunday, May 24, 2026—Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*
Lesson 287 Textual Criticism and the Transformation of Scripture in the Enlightenment

Introduction

- Since Lesson 285 we have been endeavoring to understand how the text of the Reformation was undermined. [Lesson 285](#) focused on understanding the Bibliology of the Reformers on the matter of the inspired copies. Meanwhile, [Lesson 286](#) highlighted the originals of the originals only notion and the impact of Brian Walton’s *London Ployglot Bible* (1654–1657) upon the Protestant position on scripture.
- Lesson 287 builds on the previous lessons by examining what happened after Protestant confidence in Scripture began to weaken. While the Reformers believed they possessed the providentially preserved Word of God, early modern developments—such as textual variation and critical scholarship—raised new questions. This lesson asks how the full development of textual criticism in the 17th and 18th centuries affected the doctrine of Scripture, the authority of the Church, and overall confidence in the Bible.
- According to Theodore Letis, these developments introduced a new “historical consciousness” that fundamentally changed how Scripture was understood. Rather than being viewed as a fixed, sacred text, the Bible increasingly came to be seen as a historically transmitted document requiring reconstruction. This marked the beginning of what Letis calls the “desacralization” of Scripture.
- This lesson traces how this shift unfolded. Figures like Isaac Newton applied textual criticism to doctrinal questions, while John Mill’s documentation of thousands of variants intensified the crisis. Thinkers such as Anthony Collins then used this data to challenge revealed religion itself. As these pressures mounted, scholars were forced to reconsider the doctrine of verbal inspiration, asking in what sense the Bible could still be called inspired.
- In response, Richard Bentley attempted to reassure the church by arguing that textual variants did not affect essential doctrine, a position Letis calls “harmless engagement.” This produced a divide between two schools: one maintaining doctrinal stability, the other using textual evidence to challenge traditional beliefs. At the same time, scholars began pursuing the “quest for the historical text,” shifting authority from the Church to the scholar and placing interpretation in the hands of philological judgment.
- By the end of the 18th century, these trends allowed figures like Joseph Priestley to apply textual criticism directly to doctrine, questioning teachings such as the Trinity and the virgin birth. The cumulative effect was a decisive transformation: Scripture was no longer universally regarded as a fixed, sacred text, but as a historically conditioned document subject to critical investigation—completing the process of “desacralization” described by Letis.
- All told, this Lesson will cover the following points:
 - Erasmus and the Beginning of Desacralization

- Newton and the Doctrinal Use of Textual Criticism
- The Explosion of Variants: John Mill & Anthony Collins
- The Crisis of Inspiration (LeClerc Problem)
- Doctrinal Consequences: Priestley

Erasmus and the Beginning of Desacralization

- The formerly unpublished doctoral thesis of Theodore P. Letis titled [*From Sacred Text to Religious Text: An Intellectual History of the Impact of Erasmian Lower Criticism on Dogma as a Contribution to the English Enlightenment and the Victorian Crisis of Faith*](#) is an absolute must read for anyone interested in this topic.
- Letis maintains that the omission of *comma Johanneum* (I John 5:7) by Erasmus in his “*Novum Instrumentum* (1516) signals the beginning of the process of desacralization [to divest of sacred qualities or status] for the Judeo-Christian Bible.” (Letis, 11) The verse is found in the Latin Vulgate and had been received as canonical by users of the Vulgate. Given that Erasmus’ 1516 edition was a Greek/Latin interlinear edition, the omission stood out and caused the orthodoxy of Erasmus on trinitarian grounds to be called into question.
 - “When Erasmus did not add the *comma Johanneum* to the First Epistle of John it opened the way for theologians to accuse him of contributing to a revival of Arianism. Of course, Erasmus's Christology probably had nothing to do with his judgement to omit this passage (although its omission from all the Greek codices he had surveyed probably reinforced his conviction that the Trinity was a late dogmatic reflection of the Church rather than a Biblical teaching).” (Letis, 74)
- Erasmus’ decision to omit the verse was based upon the fact that the verse was “simply missing from all the Greek witnesses he consulted.” (Letis, 74) That being said,
 - “Erasmus was, however, certain it was a corruption, added to the text by the Western Church, a witness to him of yet one more form of dogmatic corruption influencing the Latin Bible. . . The *comma Johanneum* takes on great significance from this time forward in the history of text criticism because it remains as proof positive to future Erasmians that the Church has expanded the New Testament message at places to accommodate emerging dogmatic concerns.” (Letis, 75)
- In his third edition, published in 1522, Erasmus added the *comma Johanneum* to his Greek New Testament along with an annotation questioning its authenticity.
 - “Erasmus omitted the Johannine comma from the first edition (1516) of his printed Greek New Testament on the ground that it occurred only in the Latin version and not in any Greek manuscript. To quiet the outcry that arose, he agreed to restore it if but one Greek

manuscript could be found which contained it. When one such manuscript was discovered soon afterwards, bound by his promise, he included the disputed reading in his third edition (1522), and thus it gained a permanent place in the Textus Receptus. The manuscript which forced Erasmus to reverse his stand seems to have been 61, a 15th or 16th century manuscript now kept at Trinity College, Dublin. Many critics believe that this manuscript was written at Oxford about 1520 for the special purpose of refuting Erasmus, and this is what Erasmus himself suggested in his notes.” (Hills, 209)

Newton and the Doctrinal Use of Textual Criticism

- More than a century and a half later, Sir Isaac Newton read Erasmus’ *Annotations* regarding the textual variant at I John 5:7 and consequently questioned the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. It is unclear to me at this time whether Newton was already questioning the doctrine of the trinity when he read Erasmus’ annotations. What is crystal clear, however, is that Erasmus’ notes on this textual variant impacted Newton’s thinking on the matter. Please note that some of the parentheses found within the following quotations were placed there by Letis as part of his documentation process for his dissertation. I have elected to retain them in my quotes from Letis as a means of further documentation.
 - “. . . Newton has traditionally been invoked by the faithful as perhaps the greatest luminary ever to grace the Christian Religion with his allegiance. It was a surprise to learn, therefore, some years after his death, that "privately he denied the doctrine of the Trinity and the deity of Christ as both unintelligible and unscriptural" (McLachlan 1951: 330). This was revealed when an unpublished MS by Newton was discovered. It was a treatise devoted specifically to proving the spuriousness of the *comma Johanneum* and the orthodox variant at I Tim. 3:16 . . . titled: *An Historical Account of the Two Notable Corruptions of the Scriptures, in a Letter to a Friend* (c.1687-c.1690). Not discovered and published until 1754, almost thirty years after Newton's death (d. 1727), one biographer calls this Newton's "most important theological tract" (More 1934: 632).” (Letis, 170)
- Holding a teaching post in Trinity College at Cambridge University would have obviously been a problem for a professor who denied the doctrine of the Trinity.
 - “While he was alive there were always rumors about Newton's unorthodoxy. Even in his day, to be found denying the Trinity, while not as dangerous as in Erasmus's day, could still mean one would be deprived of a teaching post at the University. At worse, one might face imprisonment (More 1934: 630). This explains why it was Newton's original purpose to have this work published anonymously, in the French language. Then, if all went well, he would also have it published in English.” (Letis, 170)
- Newton’s arguments for the spurious nature of Trinitarian doctrine took shape around a discussion of textual variants in I John 5:7 and I Timothy 3:16 (“God was manifest in the flesh” vs. “who was manifest in the flesh”).

- “Newton's thorough refutation of the authenticity of these two proof texts [I John 5:7 and I Timothy 3:16], "the two on which the doctrine of the Trinity is principally based" (More: 632), coming from the very father of the new science, was nothing short of devastating to the cause of orthodoxy:

His knowledge of the Greek and Latin Fathers, the theologians of the middle ages, and the history of sacred learning, as displayed in this work, impresses the reader with amazement at the universality of his powers and attainments (Sparks 1823: 230).” (Letis, 170-171)

- One cannot overestimate the devastating nature of Newton’s argumentation upon the cause of Protestant Orthodoxy. Letis highlights the reasons why in the following citation:
 - “This work represents the capstone to the now two-hundred-year-long attempt on the part of the Antitrinitarians to shake loose from the influence of catholic tradition, by revealing the faulty textual evidence at its base. They now had the most important advocate, perhaps since Erasmus, arguing their side.

Erasmus had disrupted confidence in the *Vulgata Latina* by discovering its textual corruptions, thus precipitating the Protestant tradition. Analogously, the Protestant theological tradition was now shown to be based on a faulty text as well. If one could no longer have confidence in the sacred text of the *Church*, one must now look for certainty elsewhere. Newton held out the promise of *scientia*. Deism was one ultimate result. If the God of *revealed* religion could no longer be trusted, surely the God of *natural* religion could.” (Letis, 171)

- Newtonian science coupled with an increase in critical editions of the Greek New Testament gave rise to popular Deism in 18th century Britain.
 - “At first, Newtonianism seemed to suggest a wonderful harmony between the new science and the traditional Faith. In time, it ate away at the miraculous. It soon came to provide those disillusioned with religious conflict and debate—both genuine critics and those looking for an easy route to celebrity by denouncing traditional belief—with a desire to search for a new horizon of certainty. The popular Biblical paraphrases of the Socinians and Arians, and the fresh textual data flowing from the new critical editions of the Greek New Testament—England was now the European center for New Testament textual studies—were the components that played an important role in the equation resulting in popular Deism.” (Letis, 172)

The Explosion of Variants: John Mill & Anthony Collins

- Anthony Collins, a late 17th and early 18th century British intellectual used the increasing awareness of variant readings to argue against the authenticity of “revealed religion.”
 - “Anthony Collins was one of the earliest to hold up the issue of textual variants in general, as one justification for abandoning the project of revealed religion altogether. Of

independent means, Collins collected a vast library. At his death it numbered six-thousand, nine hundred and six volumes, including every major work published in the area of Biblical criticism since the Reformation.

This provided Collins with a great advantage: sitting atop of such scholarship, with the leisure to thoroughly engage it, he had a devastating array of data to bring to his cause of dismantling revealed religion (Drury 1989: 21).” (Letis, 173)

- Newton’s work anticipated the later Enlightenment use of textual criticism by applying these principles to doctrine even before the full crisis generated by the explosion of textual variants had emerged.
- In 1707, British text critic John Mill published *Novum Testamentum graecum, cum Lectionibus Variatibus* MSS. Using the 1550 text of Robert Stephanous as his base (Textus Receptus), Mill noted over 30,000 variants between some one-hundred extant New Testament MSS in the critical apparatus underneath the base text. The variant readings catalogued by Mill in his Greek New Testament served as the argumentative basis for Collins to assert that the Bible was not inspired.
 - “Now Collins demanded to know, based on the collection of variants by the text critic John Mill (1645-1707), how thirty-thousand variants could exist in a document divinely inspired by the verbal dictation of God?

Certainly, Collins's was a sensationalistic challenge, but the evidence was not contrived by him, or another Deist; it was provided by a churchman, John Mill. Collins also discovered in Mill's research, an account that claimed the four Gospels were subject to an official, ecclesiastical recension in the sixth century, whence our current copies were derived (Collins: 72-73). This is significant because by the nineteenth century, textual critics would claim just such an official revision had taken place, though much earlier, in the fourth century, thus giving the medieval Greek text its particular orthodox flavor.

Collins's final master stroke was to highlight the remarks of another churchman (who, it seems, later became an Antitrinitarian), who was still laboring under the traditional, Protestant view of Scripture, and who drew similar conclusions from Mill’s thirty-thousand textual variants as did Collins himself. Collins quoted Dr. Daniel Whitby as follows:

“The vast quantity of various readings collected by the Doctor [Mill] must of course make the mind doubtful or suspicious that nothing certain can be expected from books, where there are various readings in every verse, and almost in every part of every verse.... How will the papists triumph over the text of Scripture, when they see those readings... moreover, it does not a little hurt our cause of Protestantism, that the Doctor confidently affirms, that not a few corruptions and interpolations have happened almost from the beginning of Christianity, and in the Apostolic Age (Collins: 71-72).” (Letis, 175-176)

The Crisis of Inspiration (LeClerc Problem)

- Dr. Letis also identifies the French Newtonian Jean Le Clerc as using the existence of variant readings to question to doctrine of verbal inspiration.
 - “the occasion for beginning in earnest during the English Enlightenment the reconsideration of the theme: in just what sense is the Bible inspired, and therefore a sacred text, in light of the data coming from the lower criticism?” (Letis, 36)
- Elsewhere, Letis stated the following:
 - “This verbal paradigm lost its significance during the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. In Pelikan’s words ...

once a dictation theory of inspiration had been surrendered, there arose a need to give due recognition to the place of the human component M the divine action of inspiration (Pelikan *The Cristian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine vol. 5* 1989: 244)” (Letis, 23)
- The growing awareness of textual variants raised a deeper theological issue beyond Collins’ polemical question. If the New Testament contained thousands of variant readings, in what sense could it still be described as verbally inspired? According to Letis, this period marks the beginning of a crisis in the doctrine of inspiration itself, as scholars were forced to reconsider “in just what sense is the Bible inspired... in light of the data coming from the lower criticism?”
- The traditional view—held by the Reformers and Protestant orthodoxy—that inspiration extended to the very words of Scripture (verbal inspiration) became increasingly difficult to maintain. As Letis explains, once a strict dictation view of inspiration was surrendered, scholars were compelled to acknowledge a greater human element in the text and its transmission.
- Thus, even before figures like Bentley attempted to reassure the church, the practice of textual criticism had already begun to shift the understanding of Scripture away from a perfectly preserved verbal standard toward a historically conditioned text requiring scholarly reconstruction.

The Orthodox Response: Bentley and “Harmless Engagement”

- Richard Bentley, one of the leading textual critics of early 18th century Britain, responded to Collins “under the pseudonym, Phileleutberus Lipsiensis, intending to leave the impression that the tract was written by a Lutheran in Germany.” (Letis, 177) Before answering Collins, Bentley ridicules Dr. Daniel Whitby for his belief in “the providential preservation of the Scripture.” (Letis, 177)
 - “Bentley, no friend of the old Protestant confessionalism, but a close friend of Newton, begins by castigating the churchman, Whitby, for causing all the trouble in the first place. Whitby has given expression to the old notion of the providential preservation of the Scripture. It is this doctrine Whitby sees under threat from Mill’s collection of variants.

This doctrine has produced a panic and alarm in Whitby, and he has, in turn, revealed this weakness to Collins (Bentley 1725: 63).” (Letis, 177)

- In his response to Collins, Bentley issued a challenge that has echoed throughout the halls of history:

- “This response has echoed down the corridors of time and has been invoked on every occasion in the last two hundred years, when either the integrity of the text, or the practice of text criticism are maligned. With a reckless confidence in the role of brute science to now replace the Church as the final guarantor of the Biblical text Bentley offered Collins the following challenge:

“Make your 30,000 [textual variants] as many more, if numbers of copies can ever reach that sum: all the better to a knowing and serious reader, who is thereby more richly furnished to select what he sees genuine. But even put them into the hands of a knave or a fool: and yet with the most sinister and absurd choice, he shall not extinguish the light of any one chapter, nor so disguise Christianity, but that *every feature of it will still be the same* [emphasis mine] (Bentley: 76).”

. . . Perhaps a knave might not be able to choose a textual variant that challenges the traditional understanding of the Christian Faith, but we already know that a genius like Newton was certainly able to do just that. Nevertheless, Bentley certainly drew popular sentiment in his favor. His response saw eight editions and was republished as late as 1825 (Fox: 115). The Bishop of Chichester published a thank-you tribute to Bentley's answer, which probably spoke for most of the bewildered Anglican clergy, in his *The Clergyman's Thanks to Pibileutberus For His Remarks on the Late Discourse of Free-Thinking*:

“You have pulled up this panic by the very roots; and a man must be afraid of his own shadow, who can hereafter be in pain about a variant reading, or think the number of them any prejudice to the integrity or authority of the sacred books (Hulbirt-Powefl 1937: 305).” (Letis, 177-179)

- It is in Bentley that we see the origin of the false notion that no textual variant impacts any “fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith.” Dr. Letis summarizes the implications of Bentley's comments as follows:
 - “Bentley had, nevertheless, with his promise, for the moment anaesthetized the clergy of the Anglican Church from the pangs presented by textual criticism with his articulation of the ideology of harmless engagement. The dark side of this science, however, had now been glimpsed, by both the faithful, as well as by the advocates of an alternative natural religion.” (Letis, 180)
- In his dissertation Dr. Letis argued the following point:
 - “A religious belief in verbal inspiration gave the Christian Bible its sacred text status within the matrix of the Church. The lower, or textual criticism, first practiced outside the

sanction of the Church by Erasmus and developed further by non-Trinitarians initially, offered the first significant direct challenge to this belief in the early modern period. This, the dissertation argues, was the proper beginning, phenomenologically speaking, of the process of desacralization

Moreover, it is argued that the desacralizing role of the lower criticism was further manifested when it was discovered that certain theologically significant passages, perceived by those in the Erasmian school to have resulted from later interpolation into the text of Scripture, illegitimately lent support to dogmas such as the Trinity, the deity of Christ and the virgin birth. The practice of lower criticism set in motion, well before the arrival of the higher criticism, a rather significant awakening of a historical consciousness about the developmental stages of the N. T. text, which in later recensions reflected a more full-blown orthodox expression of christological. themes. The role that the lower criticism played in introducing this historical consciousness has not been readily acknowledged by either historians or practitioners of the discipline of lower criticism.

. . . two schools arose during the English Enlightenment and carried on into the Victorian era, responding to the data of text criticism in two directions: one interpreting the data as affecting dogma, the other interpreting the data as not affecting dogma. In answering why this came about the dissertation helps to explain how the quest for the historical text culminated in the quest for the historical Jesus.” (Letis, 3)

- Bentley’s response did not resolve the underlying problem but instead, set the stage for a fundamental division in how textual criticism would be interpreted.
- Letis explains that by the early 18th century, textual criticism had produced “two schools” of interpretation. One school (represented by Bentley and later orthodox critics) insisted that textual variants did not affect essential doctrine. The other (represented by Newton, the Antitrinitarians, and later Priestley) interpreted the same data as evidence that doctrine itself had been historically altered by the transmission of the text.
- As textual variants accumulated, scholars increasingly sought to recover the earliest attainable form of the New Testament text—a movement Letis describes as the “quest for the historical text”. Letis argues that this marks the beginning of the “quest for the historical text,” a movement that introduced a new historical consciousness into biblical studies. Scripture was no longer simply received as a fixed canonical form but examined as a text that had developed over time through transmission and revision. In figures like Joseph Priestley, this quest began to move beyond the text itself to the recovery of primitive Christianity, anticipating what would later become the quest for the historical Jesus. This introduced a new historical consciousness in which the New Testament was understood as a text that had developed over time through transmission, rather than a fixed form received without change.
- Despite Bentley’s attempt to reassure the church, a more fundamental shift was already underway—one concerning not just the text itself, but who had the authority to determine it. The question of what constituted the true text of Scripture was no longer being settled by ecclesiastical tradition or confessional consensus, but increasingly by scholarly investigation and philological analysis.

- As Letis explains, the determination of the “original” text now depended on “philological judgment rather than confession,” marking a decisive transfer of authority from the Church to the scholar.
- In this new paradigm, Scripture was no longer simply received as the providentially preserved text of the Church, but as a document whose original form had to be reconstructed through the tools of textual criticism. This shift in authority laid the foundation for later figures, such as Priestley, to use textual variants not merely to evaluate the text, but to challenge established doctrine itself.

Doctrinal Consequences: Priestley

- Later in the 18th century, Unitarian Joseph Priestley would use the logic presented by Newton with respect to the *comma Johanneum* to question the virgin birth of Christ. In his *An History of Early Opinions Concerning Jesus Christ, Compiled from Original Writers* (3 Volumes) from 1789, Priestley states the following in regard to the virgin birth:
 - “There is one particular subject on which I have much enlarged in this treatise, and about which I had no intention to write at all, when I began to collect materials for it. It is the *miraculous conception* of Jesus, concerning which I had not at that time entertained any doubt; though I well knew that several very eminent and learned Christians, of ancient and modern times, had disbelieved it. The case was that, in perusing the early Christian writers, with a view to collect all opinions concerning Christ, I found so much on this subject, that I could not help giving particular attention to it; and it being impossible not to be struck with the absurdity of their reasoning about it, I was by degrees led to think whether anything better could be said in proof of the fact; and at length my collections and speculations, grew to the size that is now before the reader (Priestley 1786 Vol LXVII-XVIII).” (Letis, 285-286)
- Later in the work, Priestley explicitly makes the connection between the textual variant found in I John 5:7 and the virgin birth of Christ found in Matthew and Luke.
 - “The famous verse, [1] John, v-7., concerning the three that bear record in heaven, has been sufficiently proved to have come into the epistle in this unauthorized manner; and had it been done in an early period, there would have appeared no more reason to have suspected the genuineness of it, than there now does that of the introductions to the gospels of Matthew and Luke (Priestley 1786 Vol. 111:105).” (Letis, 286)
- Interested parties are encouraged to read Bart D. Ehrman’s discussion of textual variants as they pertain to the doctrine of the virgin birth of Christ in his *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* (See Chapter 2: Anti-Adoptionistic Corruptions of Scripture). In this section, Ehrman states the following regarding an important textual variant found in Luke 2:33:
 - “Thus, Luke 2:33 states that Jesus’ “father and mother began to marvel” . . . at the things being said about him. The majority of Greek manuscripts, however, along with a number of Old Latin, Syriac, and Coptic witnesses, have changed the text to read “Joseph and his

mother began to marvel.” The change makes perfect sense, given the orthodox view that Joseph was in fact not Jesus’ father. There can be little doubt that in this case the majority text represents a corruption rather than the original reading: a wide range of early and superior manuscripts consistently give the reading that is also more difficult. The wide attestation of the variant reading and the confluence of ancient versions in its support, however, do show that the text had been changed relatively early in the history of its transmission, at least in the third century and more likely the second—precisely during the time of the adaptationist controversies.” (Ehrman, 65)

- Textual variants such as the one found in Luke 2:33 are what led Priestly to doubt the “miraculous conception of Jesus” in the 18th century. In the 20th century, feminist author Jane Schaberg, using the same textual variants noted by Priestly and Ehrman, argued that Jesus was illegitimately conceived probably as the result of rape. Note how the quest for the historical (original) text has stripped Christ of his divinity. But, we are assured by textual critics, that none of the textual variants impact “fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith.”
- According to Letis, the developments of the 17th and 18th centuries mark a decisive turning point in the history of Scripture. Through the rise of textual criticism, the Bible gradually ceased to function as a fixed, providentially preserved sacred text and came instead to be viewed as a historically conditioned document subject to scholarly reconstruction. This process of “desacralization” began as early as Erasmus but reached a new level of intensity in the Enlightenment, where the authority of the text shifted away from ecclesiastical reception toward critical investigation.

Conclusion

- Textual criticism did not remain a purely textual discipline—it became a tool for evaluating doctrine, as seen in Newton and Priestley.
- The discovery of thousands of textual variants created a crisis of confidence, forcing scholars to question the reliability of the biblical text.
- This led to a reconsideration of inspiration, with traditional verbal inspiration giving way to a greater emphasis on the human element in transmission.
- The church’s response (Bentley’s “harmless engagement”) attempted to reassure, but ultimately did not resolve the problem. As a result, two competing schools emerged:
 - one denying doctrinal impact
 - one affirming it
- At the same time, Scripture began to be viewed historically, leading to the “quest for the historical text.”

- This shift brought a change in authority from church and confession to scholarship and philological judgment. With authority relocated, doctrine itself became subject to textual reconstruction.
- The ultimate result, according to Letis, was the desacralization of Scripture: the Bible shifted from a fixed, sacred text to a historically conditioned document.

Works Cited

Letis, Theodore P. [*From Sacred Text to Religious Text: An Intellectual History of the Impact of Erasmian Lower Criticism on Dogma as a Contribution to the English Enlightenment and the Victorian Crisis of Faith*](#). University of Edinburgh, 1995.