

A SAMPLE CHAPTER

Ad Fontes

Textual Criticism for Lutheran Laity

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CHAPTER ONE

Why Textual Criticism Matters for Confessional Lutherans

You’ve been doing textual criticism for years.

I want to start there, because I suspect some of you opened this book a little wary. The phrase “textual criticism” sounds like something a skeptical professor does to take your Bible apart. It sounds like the territory of people who don’t believe Scripture means what it says, who treat the New Testament as a piece of ancient literature to be picked over rather than a Word from God to be heard and trusted.

But here is the truth I want to set on the table before anything else. Every Sunday morning, when confessional Lutherans across the country open their pew Bibles — most of them ESVs now, with NASBs still in many hands and on many shelves — and read along with the pastor, they are already trusting the work of textual critics. Most of them have not known it. They don’t have to have known it. But the pew Bible in their lap is the product of textual-critical decisions made by careful, believing scholars who took the manuscript evidence seriously. The footnotes you skim past when you read on your own — the ones that say “some manuscripts read...” or “earliest manuscripts omit...”¹ — those are little windows into the work this book is going to spend its remaining chapters learning to look through.

So my first job in this opening chapter is not to introduce you to something foreign. It’s to put a name to something you’ve already been doing. And then to convince you of a claim I’ll defend across the rest of this book: that textual criticism, rightly understood, is not a threat to the Bible. It’s a friend of the Bible. And specifically — this is where I want to land us in the pages that follow — it’s a friend of confessional Lutheran theology.

THE FOOTNOTES YOU’VE BEEN SKIPPING

Take an ESV down off the shelf for a minute. Open to Mark 16. Look at verse 8, and notice that there is something printed after it: a bracket, a line, a small note. The ESV tells

1. These two phrases are the ESV’s standard formulas for textual notes. The 2016 ESV updates retained the same conventions used since the original 2001 edition. Other modern translations use slightly different language to mark the same kind of decisions; the NASB notes are typically the most detailed, the NET is by far the most expansive, and the NIV is the most concise.

you, in plain English, that “some of the earliest manuscripts do not include 16:9–20.”² Now turn to John 7. At the end of verse 52, there is another bracket and another note: “the earliest manuscripts do not include 7:53–8:11.”³ Flip to 1 John 5:7 and you’ll see the verse looks shorter than the one your grandmother might have read out loud at the kitchen table. The translators have made decisions. They have put some things in the text and some things in the footnotes, and they have told you, quietly but honestly, why.

This is textual criticism. It is the discipline of asking, when we have hundreds or thousands of handwritten copies of a New Testament book, and those copies don’t agree on every word, “What did the apostle most likely write?” That’s the question. That’s the whole field, in one sentence. The methods get sophisticated, and we’ll spend several chapters learning them. But the question stays simple all the way down.

Here, let me make it concrete. Open an ESV to Romans 8:1. You read, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Period. End of verse. Now if you set a KJV next to that ESV — pull one off a shelf, or open one on a phone — you’ll see something the ESV doesn’t have. The KJV continues: “who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.” Almost a whole second clause, missing from the ESV. What happened? Did the modern translators just decide to drop a phrase about holy living? Did the ESV soften Paul to make him more comfortable for modern ears?

No. What happened is this: the earliest and best manuscripts of Romans 8:1 don’t have that second clause.⁴ Look down at verse 4 in your ESV — “who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” That phrase is there, in verse 4, in every manuscript we have. The best explanation for what happened is that a scribe, somewhere in the second or third century, copying verse 1, glanced down at verse 4, saw the lovely phrase “who walk not according to the flesh,” and — either accidentally or because it sounded right — added it to verse 1. From that one scribe’s copy, the addition spread into a whole stream of later manuscripts, and eventually into the manuscripts Erasmus used in 1516, and from there into the Textus Receptus, and from there into the King James. The scribe wasn’t malicious. He may not even have known he was doing it. But the

2. ESV note at Mark 16:8. The ESV prints verses 9–20 in the text but sets them in double brackets and adds the note. The NASB95 likewise prints them with brackets; the NA28 Greek text places them in double square brackets, the standard editorial signal that the editors regard the passage as a later addition.

3. ESV note at John 7:53. As at Mark 16, the ESV prints the passage in double brackets with the note. The story is sometimes called the Pericope Adulterae. We will treat it in detail in chapter 6.

4. Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft / United Bible Societies, 1994), 456. Metzger walks through how the addition spread, including a partial form (“who walk not according to the flesh”) and a fuller form (adding “but according to the Spirit”); the United Bible Societies’ committee rated the omission of the addition an “A” reading, meaning they regarded it as virtually certain.

words weren't Paul's. The ESV is restoring Paul's verse 1 to what Paul originally wrote. That is textual criticism. That is what the footnote in your ESV at Romans 8:1 is quietly telling you happened, in the most diplomatic possible language: "some manuscripts add 'who walk...according to the Spirit.'"

You see what I mean. You've been doing this. You just didn't have the vocabulary for it.

I want you to feel something right now. The translators of the ESV — and the NASB before it, and the NET, and the CSB, and the NIV — those translators all, in their own ways, did textual criticism. They did it on your behalf. And they handed you a Bible that you have rightly trusted. What we're doing in this book is opening the hood on a car you've already been driving. The car runs. We're not here to convince you to walk. We're here to understand what's under the hood, so that when somebody on the internet tells you the engine's about to fall out, you can answer them.

WHY THIS BOOK, WHY THIS AUDIENCE

I've been thinking about this book for a long time. Part of the reason is that the questions come up. They come up at coffee, they come up after Bible class, they come up in text messages from college kids. "Pastor said something about Mark 16 last Sunday — what's that about?" "My friend at work says modern Bibles took out verses about the Trinity. Did they?" "I saw a YouTube video that said the New Testament has 400,000 errors. Is that true?" These are real questions from real people in real confessional Lutheran congregations. I've fielded versions of all of them. And I've watched faithful Christians — sometimes the kids of friends, sometimes the friends themselves — get knocked sideways by a video or a podcast that they had no framework to evaluate.

Confessional Lutherans deserve a framework. We are people of the Book. We confess that "the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments are the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised and judged" (Formula of Concord, Epitome).⁵ When we say "the prophetic and apostolic writings," we mean the actual words those prophets and apostles wrote. So when the question comes up — "Do we still have those actual words? How do we know? What about the places where the manuscripts don't all match?" — that is not an idle question. That is a question our confession itself raises and demands an answer to.

5. Formula of Concord, Epitome, Rule and Norm, 1, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 486. The Solid Declaration on the same point is even more emphatic.

Here's another reason for this book. Most confessional Lutheran congregations today read from the ESV; many came up on the NASB, and a few legacy AAT or older RSV Bibles still sit in pews and on shelves. All of those translations are based on what's called the "critical text" of the Greek New Testament — that is, an edition of the Greek that takes into account all the manuscript evidence we now have, including manuscripts the King James translators in 1611 didn't have access to. Confessional Lutherans, by and large, have already trusted that work. Our church bodies — AFLC, LCMS, WELS, ELS — are not KJV-only. When the ESV came out, our pastors and congregations did not anxiously ask, "are these still the real words of Jesus?" They trusted, and rightly, that the translators were faithful and the underlying Greek was sound.

What I want to give you in the chapters that follow is the why behind that trust. Not blind trust — trust with reasons.

THE REFORMERS AS TEXTUAL CRITICS

Here is the move that will take some of you by surprise. Textual criticism is not a modern liberal invention. It is, at its heart, a Reformation enterprise. The phrase the Reformers loved — *ad fontes*, "to the sources" — is the same instinct that drives textual criticism today.

Think about what Luther actually did. When he sat down to translate the New Testament into German in 1521 and 1522, hidden away in the Wartburg Castle, he did not translate from the Latin Vulgate. The Vulgate had been the Bible of the Western Church for a thousand years. It was the Bible of the priests, the Bible of the universities, the Bible Luther himself had memorized as a monk. But Luther did not translate from the Vulgate. He translated from the Greek New Testament that Erasmus had published just a few years earlier, in 1516.⁶ He went back to the source.

Why? Because Luther understood — as the whole humanist movement around him understood — that translations are derivative. If you want to know what an apostle said, you go to what the apostle wrote, in the language he wrote it in. If a translation has drifted, even an honored thousand-year-old translation, the answer is not to keep using it because it's familiar. The answer is to go back to the source and check.

That impulse — *ad fontes* — is the Reformation impulse. And here's the thing I want you to see: textual criticism is the same impulse, applied with more evidence. Luther

6. The full title of Erasmus's 1516 edition was *Novum Instrumentum omne, diligenter ab Erasmo Roterodamo recognitum et emendatum*, published in Basel by Johann Froben. The 1519 second edition (retitled *Novum Testamentum*) was the edition Luther actually used at the Wartburg.

had Erasmus's Greek New Testament, which was based on a handful of late medieval manuscripts that Erasmus could find in Basel. Erasmus did the best he could with what he had. We have, today, around 5,800 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament,⁷ some of them more than a thousand years older than anything Erasmus ever saw. The instinct is the same. The evidence is fuller.

I want you to feel just how thin Erasmus's evidence base actually was, because this matters for how we think about everything that came after him. Erasmus rushed his 1516 Greek New Testament to press, in part because he wanted to beat a rival project to publication. He had something like six manuscripts to work with — a small handful, all of them late, none of them earlier than the eleventh or twelfth century. For the book of Revelation, he had only one manuscript, and that manuscript was missing its last leaf. So Erasmus did what a hurried Renaissance scholar does: he back-translated the missing verses from the Latin Vulgate into his own Greek.⁸ Those last verses of Revelation — verses we still read today — entered the printed Greek New Testament not from any Greek manuscript at all, but from Erasmus's own Latin-to-Greek reconstruction. And that reconstructed Greek made its way, eventually, into the Textus Receptus, and from there into the King James. There are little phrases in Revelation 22 in the KJV that, strictly speaking, never appeared in any Greek manuscript before Erasmus put them there.

I'm not telling you that story to embarrass Erasmus. He was a giant, and we owe him an enormous debt. The Reformation runs on his work. I'm telling you the story so you can see, with your own eyes, why "the text the Reformers used" cannot be the standard for "the text we should use today." The Reformers used the best text available to them in 1516. They would, I am confident, have rejoiced at every additional manuscript God's providence has brought to light since. That's the Reformation instinct: to keep going to

7. The official catalog maintained by the Institute for New Testament Textual Research (INTF) in Münster, the Kurzgefasste Liste, currently lists just under 6,000 Greek manuscripts; Daniel Wallace places the actual figure at approximately 5,800 after correcting for duplicates and miscatalogues. See Daniel B. Wallace, "How Big a Stack? The Number of New Testament Manuscripts," danielbwallace.com (January 1, 2023). To this Greek total we should add roughly 10,000–20,000 versional manuscripts (Latin, Syriac, Coptic, and others) and more than a million patristic citations.

8. On Erasmus's manuscript base and the Revelation back-translation, see Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 142–46. The single Revelation manuscript Erasmus used (Greg.-Aland 2814, then known as Reuchlin's codex) lacked the final six verses; he supplied them by translating from the Vulgate. The most often-cited example is Rev. 22:19, where Erasmus's Latin-derived Greek read *biblou zōēs* ("book of life") where the Greek manuscript tradition reads *xylou zōēs* ("tree of life"). The reading survives in no Greek manuscript before Erasmus but was carried into the Textus Receptus and the KJV. We will return to this in chapter 3.

the sources, even when the sources are inconvenient, even when the sources unsettle the familiar.

Now I want to be careful here. I am not going to tell you that the Reformers would have rejected the Textus Receptus had they known what we know. That's a counterfactual, and I don't trade in those. What I am going to say is this: the Reformers committed themselves to a principle — go to the original, work from the best evidence you can find, refuse to let tradition or familiarity stand in for truth. That principle, lived out in our day, with the manuscripts now available to us, is what we call textual criticism. We are not departing from the Reformers when we do this work. We are honoring them.

There is a beautiful irony here that I want you to feel. The people who tell you that modern textual criticism is a liberal corruption of the pure Reformation Bible have it almost exactly backwards. Refusing to engage the manuscript evidence — that would be the un-Reformational move. That would be the move that says, “We have a familiar text, please don't disturb us with the sources.” The Reformers would have torn their robes. To the sources, they said. And here we are, going to the sources.

THE 400,000 VARIANTS PROBLEM

Now we have to talk about the number that haunts every conversation about textual criticism. You've heard it. Maybe from Bart Ehrman directly, in his bestselling book *Misquoting Jesus*.⁹ Maybe from someone quoting Ehrman without knowing they were quoting him. The number is 400,000 — sometimes 300,000, sometimes 500,000 — variants in the New Testament manuscripts. More variants, the line goes, than there are words in the New Testament itself.

That number is, broadly speaking, accurate. And the way it's typically deployed is, broadly speaking, dishonest.

Here's why. A “variant” in textual-critical terminology is any place where the manuscripts differ from one another, in any way, including ways that don't affect translation at all. If one manuscript spells a name with an extra iota and another doesn't — that's a variant. If one manuscript has a definite article in front of a name and another doesn't (Greek does this a lot, and it changes nothing in English) — that's a variant. If a scribe accidentally wrote a word twice and then crossed it out, or skipped a line and a later

⁹ Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005). The book's technical scholarship is largely uncontroversial; its popular framing has been widely criticized, including by Ehrman's former teacher Bruce Metzger and by Daniel Wallace. For a sustained evangelical response, see Daniel B. Wallace, ed., *Revisiting the Corruption of the New Testament: Manuscript, Patristic, and Apocryphal Evidence* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011).

scribe corrected it in the margin — variants. The number gets large fast, because every spelling difference, every word-order shuffle, every minor accident over fourteen centuries of hand-copying counts.

So when somebody tells you “there are 400,000 variants in the New Testament, more than there are words,” what they are not telling you is that the overwhelming majority of those variants are nothing. They are spelling differences and definite articles and word-order changes that wouldn’t even register in any English translation. The scholar Daniel Wallace estimates — and this is widely accepted across the field, including by people who otherwise disagree with each other — that fewer than one percent of variants are both meaningful and viable.¹⁰ That is, fewer than one percent are places where the variants actually change meaning AND have a serious claim to being the original reading. We are talking about a few hundred genuinely consequential variants in a New Testament of nearly 140,000 words.

And here is the part that should give you confidence, not anxiety. Of those few hundred consequential variants, not one of them — not one — overturns a single Christian doctrine. Not the Trinity. Not the deity of Christ. Not justification by grace through faith. Not the resurrection. Every doctrine of the Christian faith is taught in passages whose text is not in dispute. The places where we have to make textual decisions are real, and we’ll spend weeks on the most important ones, but the gospel does not rise or fall on any of them. The gospel is solid.

I want to push this one step further, because it’s important. The reason we have so many variants is that we have so many manuscripts. This is the part nobody tells you when they wave the 400,000 number around. If we had ten manuscripts of the New Testament, we would have very few variants — and we would also know almost nothing about what the original text looked like. We would be at the mercy of those ten copies. But we have nearly six thousand Greek manuscripts, plus thousands more in Latin, Syriac, Coptic, and other ancient versions, plus over a million quotations of the New Testament in the writings of the Church Fathers. The flood of evidence is what produces the catalog of variants. It is also what allows us, with high confidence, to reconstruct what the apostles actually wrote.

Compare this to any other ancient document. Caesar’s Gallic Wars survives in about ten manuscripts, the earliest from nine hundred years after Caesar wrote. Tacitus’s

10. Daniel B. Wallace, “The Number of Textual Variants: An Evangelical Miscalculation,” in *Revisiting the Corruption of the New Testament*, 27–38. The “less than 1%” figure for meaningful and viable variants is widely cited and is consistent with the data even Ehrman acknowledges in the appendix to later editions of *Misquoting Jesus*.

Annals — eight or nine manuscripts, the earliest seven hundred years out.¹¹ Nobody throws their hands up and says we can't know what Caesar or Tacitus wrote. The New Testament has hundreds of times more manuscript evidence, with manuscripts coming within decades of the originals. The textual situation of the New Testament is the best of any ancient writing, by an enormous margin. Our anxiety should be calibrated accordingly.

A PREVIEW: THE END OF MARK

Let me show you, briefly, where we're going. A whole chapter is coming on this one, but I want you to taste the kind of work we're going to do.

Open to Mark 16:8. The women have come to the tomb, the angel has told them Jesus is risen, and Mark says, “they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” Verse 8. End of sentence.

If you're reading the ESV, the next thing you see is a bracket, and then a note. Some translations print verses 9–20 in brackets. Some print them in regular type with a footnote. The KJV prints them straight through, no notation. What's going on?

Here is the situation, in one paragraph, just to give you the flavor. Our two oldest and most respected complete manuscripts of the New Testament, both from the fourth century, do not contain Mark 16:9–20.¹² They end the Gospel at verse 8. Several other early manuscripts and ancient versions either omit the longer ending, or include a different shorter ending, or mark the longer ending as questionable. The fourth-century church historian Eusebius wrote that the most accurate copies in his day ended at verse 8.¹³ The longer ending, when it appears, is also written in a Greek style noticeably different from the rest of Mark — different vocabulary, different rhythms. On the other hand,

11. Manuscript counts and dates for Caesar and Tacitus are notoriously fuzzy because what counts as a “manuscript” depends on whether one includes fragments, excerpts, and palimpsests. The figures cited here are the standard textbook approximations and are not seriously disputed. For a careful comparison of New Testament manuscript evidence with that of other ancient writings, see Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the New Testament* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 19–27; and the older but still useful F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*, 6th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981).

12. Codex Sinaiticus (Ⲱ, 01) and Codex Vaticanus (B, 03), both produced in the fourth century. Sinaiticus is now held at the British Library (with portions in Leipzig, St. Catherine's Monastery, and St. Petersburg); Vaticanus is held in the Vatican Library. High-resolution images of both are freely available online — Sinaiticus at codexsinaiticus.org, Vaticanus through the Vatican Library's digital portal. Vaticanus is especially striking at this point: the scribe leaves the rest of the column blank after Mark 16:8, an unusual feature that many scholars read as evidence the scribe knew of the longer ending but chose not to include it.

the longer ending shows up in the vast majority of later manuscripts, was used by some early Church Fathers, and has been read in the church for many centuries.

You don't have to decide today. The question I want you to feel right now is just this: What do we do with that? Is the longer ending of Mark Scripture? If we're honest about the evidence, what does faithful confessional Lutheran teaching look like on a passage like this? We're going to take our time on it. We're going to look at the manuscripts. We're going to read what Luther said and what the Lutheran Confessions actually require. And I think you'll find that the answer is both more honest and more pastorally satisfying than either "the modern Bibles took it out" or "obviously it's not Scripture."

That's the kind of work we're going to do in the chapters ahead. Not arms-folded skepticism. Not pretend-everything-is-fine triumphalism. Honest evidence, careful reasoning, confessional faithfulness, pastoral care.

WHY THIS SHOULD MAKE YOU MORE CONFIDENT, NOT LESS

I want to land us where we started — on confidence. Because I know that for some readers, this whole conversation feels risky. You picked up this book loving your Bible, and I've just told you that there are places where we're going to have to ask hard questions about what the original text was. That can feel like the ground tilting.

So hear me say this clearly. I am not asking you to be less confident in your Bible. I am asking you to be confident on better grounds.

There is a kind of confidence that depends on never looking too closely. It says, "I have a Bible, it's been the same forever, please don't tell me anything that complicates it." That confidence is brittle. It cannot survive a single college class, a single internet skeptic, a single honest conversation with a thoughtful friend. When it breaks — and for many young Christians it does break — what often follows is not a deeper faith but a collapsed one.

The confidence I want for you is different. It's the confidence of a person who has looked at the evidence, understood the situation, weighed the variants, seen the manuscripts, and concluded — on good grounds — that we have, with very high reliability, the words the apostles wrote. That is the confidence of a Christian who can look an Ehrman

13. Eusebius of Caesarea, *Quaestiones ad Marinum* (often cited as *Ad Marinum*) 1, in PG 22:937. Eusebius writes that the longer ending is missing from "almost all" of the accurate copies and is found only in "some." Jerome makes a parallel observation in *Epistle 120 to Hedibia*. Both witnesses are early-fourth- and early-fifth-century, respectively.

fan in the eye and say, “Yes, I know about the variants. I know about Mark 16. I know about the Comma. Let me tell you what I think and why.”

That confidence is not just better for engaging the world. It is, I think, more honest before God. The God who chose to give us His Word through human writers, on perishable materials, copied by human hands across centuries, did not give us a frictionless Bible. He gave us a Bible whose history we can study. He gave us a Bible we can trace. The fact that we can do this — that the manuscript trail exists, that the variants are catalogued, that the evidence is public and examinable — is not a problem for our doctrine of Scripture. It is a gift. It means our faith is not in a magical book that descended from heaven. It is in the apostolic witness to the risen Christ, preserved through ordinary, traceable, examinable means, and held by the Church across the ages.

The confessional Lutheran doctrine of Scripture has always made room for this. We confess that the autographs — the very words penned by Matthew, John, Paul, and the rest — were inspired and inerrant. That’s the doctrine of inspiration, and it is anchored in the originals. We also confess that God has faithfully preserved His Word in the apographs, the copies, that came after. That’s the doctrine of preservation, and it is anchored in the manuscript tradition as a whole.¹⁴

I want you to see what that two-part confession does for us, because it is theological gold. It tells us that inspiration applies to a fixed, historical event — the moment Paul, or his secretary, set ink to papyrus — and that preservation applies to the long, providential history of copying and recopying that brought those words down to us. The originals are inerrant. The copies are faithful. And “faithful” does not mean “identical down to every last spelling.” Faithful means God so superintended the manuscript tradition that the apostolic message has been preserved, in its substance and in nearly all its details, across two thousand years of hand-copying. The variants are real. The faithfulness is also real. Both can be true at once because preservation operates not in any single manuscript but in the tradition as a whole — the whole stream of evidence, taken together, witnessing to what the apostles wrote.

This is why no single manuscript and no single printed edition can be elevated to the place of “the preserved Bible.” Not Vaticanus. Not Sinaiticus. Not Erasmus’s 1516. Not the

¹⁴ The autographs/apographs distinction is articulated with great care in Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 4 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1950–57), 1:217–27, 348–57; and at greater length in Robert D. Preus, *The Inspiration of Scripture: A Study of the Theology of the 17th Century Lutheran Dogmaticians* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1955), esp. 134–49. Both Pieper and Preus follow the seventeenth-century Lutheran scholastics (Quenstedt, Hollaz, Calov) in distinguishing inspiration, which terminates on the autographs, from preservation, which God works through the manuscript tradition as a whole.

Textus Receptus. Not the 1611 King James. Not Nestle-Aland 28. None of these is the preserved text by itself. They are all witnesses, of varying weight, to a text God has preserved in and through the manuscript tradition as a whole. To pin our doctrine of preservation on any one of them is to make a category mistake — to demand that a fixed printed edition do work that only the providence of God, working across the whole tradition, can do.

When confessional Lutherans read their ESVs on Sunday morning, they are reading the fruit of that providence. When the translators chose this reading over that one in Romans 8:1, in Mark 16, in 1 John 5, they were exercising the kind of judgment that the doctrine of preservation invites. We are not, when we do textual criticism, trying to rebuild a Bible that was lost. We are tracing the contours of a Bible God has been preserving the whole time. Our job, with humility and care, is to read that stream rightly. That is what textual criticism is. That is what we are about to do together in the pages that follow.

THE ROAD AHEAD

Here's the journey. We'll start with foundations — how we got the New Testament, how the printed Greek text developed from Erasmus to the present, and how textual critics actually work. Then we'll spend most of the book on the variants that matter most: the ending of Mark, the woman caught in adultery in John 8, the Comma Johanneum in 1 John 5, the places where the critical text actually strengthens orthodox theology, the variants that touch the words of Jesus, the variants in Paul. Then we'll widen the lens to the ancient versions and the Church Fathers, and we'll give a fair hearing to the Majority Text position. And we'll land in the final two chapters on confessional Lutheran theology of Scripture and on practical reading of your Bible with the new eyes you'll have by then.

Every chapter will follow the same pattern. We'll look at a passage in multiple translations, side by side. We'll read the footnotes carefully. We'll look at the manuscript evidence in plain English. We'll ask which reading better explains the other — that is, if reading A is original, can we explain how reading B arose? And vice versa? We'll consider what's at stake theologically, if anything. And we'll land on a pastoral takeaway. Always. No chapter ends in academic suspension; every chapter ends in faith.

Before you turn the page to chapter 2, I'll suggest one small thing. Pick a short New Testament book — 1 John, Philippians, James are good choices. Read it in one sitting in your ESV. This time, don't skip the footnotes. Just notice them. Notice how often the translators are letting you in on a textual decision. You'll start to see, before we say

another word, just how much of this work has already been done quietly on your behalf for years.

Chapter 2 picks up with how we got the New Testament in the first place — where the books came from, what they were written on, who copied them, how they spread. The story is more interesting and more reassuring than you’ve been led to believe.

Thanks be to God, who gave us His Word. And thanks be to God that He gave us a Word we can study.

This is where the sample ends. The rest of Ad Fontes is the invitation it opens onto.

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