Professor George D. Kilpatrick’s text-critical studies, spanning more than thirty years and treating myriad New Testament passages and countless textual variations, have been particularly instructive and indeed provocative in their attention to the so-called internal criteria for deciding between or among variant readings in the New Testament manuscript tradition. By these contributions he has placed all of us much in his debt, and it would be in no way an overstatement to say that he has brought the whole question of text-critical criteria to the forefront of our current discussion. All textual critics, whether they pay more attention to internal evidence or to external, are concerned with textual variants—they are their stock in trade—and the careful definition of “textual variant” and its associated terms is not only important but fundamental to the entire discipline. This study attempts such definitions, for, surprising though it may seem, some of the basic terminology of New Testament textual criticism has been used much too loosely in the past.

The perspective and thrust of this essay admittedly are quite different from the major emphases of Kilpatrick’s own text-critical work; whereas he has emphasized increasingly the stylistic, linguistic, and scribal factors in textual variation, the writer and his several American colleagues mentioned in this paper have emphasized the rôle of so-called external evidence, including the possible reconstruction of the earliest history of the New Testament text, the grouping of manuscripts and the quantitative measurement of their relationships, and the relative weight to be given to such groups and

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1 This paper received its first hearing on 25 October 1974 in the Textual Criticism Seminar of the Society of Biblical Literature, Washington, D.C., and it appears here with revisions that were prompted by the Seminar discussion. Publication of the paper in a Festschrift for George D. Kilpatrick accounts for the introductory remarks. [See now The Principles and Practice of New Testament Textual Criticism: Collected Essays of G. D. Kilpatrick (ed. J. K. Elliott; BETL 96; Leuven: Peters/Leuven University Press, 1990).]
to individual manuscripts in text-critical decisions. To those by whom variants are treated much more as independent entities, that is, as readings in isolation from any presumed text-type or any other particular textual tradition or history, some of the discussion that follows will appear to be inconsequential. In this respect, a number of differences with Kilpatrick doubtless can be anticipated, but the following treatise is presented with the direct aim and with the sincere hope both of clarifying the terminology used by all of us and of stimulating discussion on those crucial points where differences remain.

I. Introduction: The Problems

The clarification, definition, and delimitation of the term “textual variant” are vastly more complex and difficult matters than at first would appear. The common or surface assumption is that any textual reading that differs in any way from any other reading in the same unit of text is a “textual variant,” but this simplistic definition will not suffice. Actually, in New Testament textual criticism the term “textual variant” really means—and must mean—“significant” or “meaningful textual variant,” but immediately this raises the further question of the meaning of “significant” or “meaningful.” For example, a clear scribal error is certainly a variant in the common sense of the term, but is it a significant variant? A nonsense reading clearly is a variation, but is it meaningful? A singular reading, particularly when it can be construed grammatically or gives a new denotation, is even more clearly a variant in the everyday sense, but is it significant?

Involved in these questions is a further one: significant for what? Here the complexities multiply. For instance, a clear scribal error is a textual variation, but it is not a significant textual variant for recovering the original text, nor is it significant for determining manuscript relationships—unless, of course, the error has been copied and reproduced in an uncorrected form by a later scribe, but even then coincidence in a commonly committed scribal error cannot easily or often be utilized as proof of a direct manuscript relationship. The scribal error, however, may be a “significant” variant reading for the study of scribal habits and characteristics even though it is not “significant” for broader text-critical tasks. Orthographic variations are similar in nature and pose similar problems. A further example