

Sunday, May 7, 2017— Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*
 Lesson 55 The Process of Preservation: The Question of Access and Availability

Introduction

- Last week in Lesson 54 we looked at the simultaneous nature of preservation and corruption. We saw that both were occurring during the first century when the New Testament was being written.
- Since Lesson 48 we have been studying the Process of Preservation. In summation, we have observed the following from scripture:
 - God promised to preserve His word.
 - Preservation was accomplished not by the preservation of the original autographs but through a multiplicity of accurate reliable copies that are just as authoritative as the originals themselves.
 - In the Old Testament the nation of the Israel was the custodian of the words of God. During the dispensation of grace the body of Christ and local churches are the pillar and the ground of the truth.
 - In the Old Testament the copying process was overseen by the tribe of Levi. During the early part of the dispensation of grace the office of the New Testament prophet identified, copied, and distributed the scripture. Once the gift of prophecy ceased, the job of preserving/copying the text fell to Bible believing Pauline grace assemblies.
 - Preservation and corruption were occurring at the same time.
- From this we conclude that the word of God is not preserved in a beautifully bound copy of a vellum scroll sitting on a library shelf somewhere. Rather, the word of God is preserved in the open in the hands of soul-winning, bible-believing, bible-preaching people. Bible-believing people use God's word, and the copies of the word of God that they use get worn out. Thus, the necessity for faithful reliable copies to carry God's word from generation to generation.
- This preservation model implies that God's word was available and accessible to God's people not hidden away in the desert sand, under a rock, in a cave, or an inaccessible library.
- Over the next few weeks we will conclude our discussion of preservation for this term by looking at the issues of availability and accessibility.

The Question of Availability and Accessibility

- In this section we will once again use Dr. William W. Combs' essay from the Fall 2000 issue of the *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* titled "The Preservation of Scripture" to frame the

discussion. The pertinent portion is a section titled “Is Public Availability a Necessary Component of Preservation?” that is toward the end of the essay.

- Before proceeding further it is important to notice the circumscribed limits that Combs has placed upon the discussion.
- Dr. Combs begins this section by noting that many King James/*Textus Receptus* advocates “argue that the doctrine of preservation also includes the idea of public availability of the true text of Scripture.” (Combs, 41) As proof of the notion Combs offers the following quotations from Dr. Edward F. Hills:
 - “It must be that down through the centuries God has exercised a special, providential control over the copying of the Scriptures and the preservation and use of the copies, so that trustworthy representatives of the original text **have been available to God’s people in every age.**” (Hills, 2)
 - “He must have preserved them not secretly in holes and caves but in a public way in the usage of His Church.” (Hills, 86)
- According to Dr. Combs the sentiments expressed by Dr. Hills were first expressed by Dean Burgon in the late 19th century subsequent to the publication of the Westcott and Hort Greek Text (W&HT) as well as the Revised Version in 1881. Burgon stated the following in *The Traditional Text of the Gospels* in 1896:
 - “I am utterly unable to believe, in short, that God’s promise has so entirely failed, that at the end of 1800 years much of the text of the Gospel had in point of fact to be picked by a German critic out of a waste-paper basket in the convent of St. Catherine; and that the entire text had to be remodeled after the pattern set by a couple of copies which had remained in neglect during fifteen centuries, and had probably owed their survival to that neglect; whilst hundreds of others had been thumbed to pieces, and had bequeathed their witness to copies made from them.” (Burgon, 12)
- In other words, according to the textual model embraced by Drs. Westcott and Hort, Burgon reasoned that “. . . God kept hidden from the church the true text of the Word of God from sometime around the ninth century until the discoveries of the Codex Sinaiticus and Vaticanus in the nineteenth century.” (Combs, 42)
- While I personally find the reasoning of both Hills and Burgon to be sound given the parameters of the debate, Dr. Combs not surprisingly takes exception to it. Firstly, Combs views the expression “true text” as “loaded language” that “distorts the view of those who do not believe that either the TR or MT is necessarily the closest text to the autographs.” (Combs, 42) Dr. Combs maintains that the TR, MT, and W&HT all accurately convey the message of the autographs. Therefore, the TR, MT, W&HT as well as the more recent editions of the Nestle-Aland Text and the United Bible Societies’ Text can all rightly be called the “true text” because

they “accurately convey the message of the autographs.” According to Combs there are no substantive differences between the various Greek texts listed above that affect doctrine.

- “It has already been argued that doctrinal differences among Christians do not stem from differences in Greek texts or English versions. Many of us simply prefer the more recent editions of the Greek New Testament because we honestly believe that they present a text that is somewhat more accurately representative of the autographs.” (Combs, 42)
- If Combs believes that “more recent editions of the Greek New Testament” are better representatives of the autographs then he must by default believe that there are verses in the TR/KJB that should not be there. How the presence of extra verses does not affect doctrine is beyond my ability to comprehend. The notion that the debate over the inclusion or exclusion of Mark 16:9-20 does not affect any doctrine is wishful thinking on the part of Combs.
- Consequently, Combs’ first objection to the notion that preservation includes the idea of “public availability” is a moot point. The verses and readings that Combs thinks are the best representation of the originals were not made available to the body of Christ until the late 19th century according to the critical theory. Therefore, the objections to the critical theory and its implications voiced by Burgon and Hills on the grounds of “public availability” still stand.
- Combs’ second objection to the notion that preservation requires “public availability” centers on the fact that scriptures make no such proclamation.
 - “Second, the belief that God must have made the Scriptures publicly available at all times has no basis in Scripture itself or in the transmission history of the text.” (Combs, 42)
- While it is true that there is no single verse in which God explicitly states, “I will preserve my word by making it publically available;” the totality of verses that we have looked at regarding the Process of Preservation imply not only availability to God’s people but also use by them.
- Combs states the following to buttress his point from above:
 - “In fact, Scripture itself records an instance where part of the Old Testament was not available for a period of probably more than fifty years. When the temple was being repaired in the eighteenth year of the reign of Josiah (622 B.C.), we read of the finding of “the book of the law” by Hilkiah the high priest (2 Kings 22:8–10; 2 Chr 34:14–18). Though it is not clear whether “the book of the law” is a reference to the entire Pentateuch or just the book of Deuteronomy, it is undeniable from the reaction of Josiah (vv. 11ff.) that there had been general ignorance of the Law for some time (Josiah says “our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book,” v. 13). According to Deuteronomy 31, Moses wrote down the Law and gave it to the Levites to “place it beside the ark of the covenant” (v. 26). It is probable that normal access to the Scriptures was through copies since the ark, and presumably the Law, was placed in the most holy confines of the temple. But during the reign of Manasseh (697–642 B.C.) true Israelite religion was

practically wiped out, and **it may well be** that all copies of the Law were destroyed, thus explaining the general ignorance of the Law until it was discovered during the reign of Josiah.” (Combs, 42-43)

- First, note how Combs inadvertently advocates for the Process of Preservation we have outlined in the class. He acknowledges that original autographs were placed in the Ark of the Covenant in the holy of holies first in the tabernacle and later in the temple. He then states that “normal access to the Scriptures was through copies.” While it is true that under the reign of Manasseh Israel did not fare well spiritually; there is a big difference between “practically wiped out” as Combs acknowledges and entirely wiped out. Therefore, his statement “**it may well be** that all copies of the Law were destroyed” is complete speculation. Does Combs actually believe that the only copy of the book of Law in all of Israel was the one found by Hilkiah the priest during the reign of Josiah? Just because the word of God may have been absent from the priests and the king for a period of time does not mean it was unknown or unavailable to believers within Israel.
- Romans 11:4—the reign of Ahab was another terrible time for the truth of God’s word in Israel’s history. Yet Paul says that as many as 7,000 Israelites had “not bowed the knee to the image of Baal.” It is nothing but pure speculation on the part of Combs that II Kings 22:8–10 and II Chronicles 34:14–18 mean that God’s word was not available to anyone outside of what was found in the temple. In fact, I would argue that it would be contrary to God’s purpose in preservation to allow His word to be diminished to only one available witness.
 - Psalms 68:11

Daniel B. Wallace on Public Accessibility

- Dr. Combs is not the only author to take acceptance with the notion that “accessibility” is critical in the Process of Preservation. In the 1990s Dr. Daniel B. Wallace published a series of essays in scholarly journals in which he challenged the “corollary of accessibility.” (Wallace *The Majority-Text Theory*, 188) In his 1994 essay “The Majority-Text Theory: History, Methods and Critique” Wallace argues that “accessibility” is “inferred” by those supporting the Majority Text position.
 - “Hence the MT position is based on a corollary (accessibility) of a corollary (preservation) of a particular dogmatic stance (verbal inspiration).” (Wallace TMTT, 201)
- Wallace’s comments from 1994 were preceded by his 1992 essay titled “Inspiration, Preservation, and New Testament Textual Criticism” in the *Grace Theological Journal*. In this essay Dr. Wallace quotes Dr. Edward F. Hills and offers the following comment in response:
 - “ ‘God must preserve this text, not secretly, not hidden away in a box for hundreds of years or mouldering unnoticed on some library shelf, but openly before the eyes of all men through continued usage in his church.’ (Hills, 31) Preservation is therefore linked to public accessibility.” (Wallace, IPNTTC, 30)

- The same essay contains an entire section titled “Public accessibility of a pure text is a theological necessity.” In this section, Dr. Wallace argues against the notion of “accessibility” on the following general grounds: 1) the majority text was not available until 1982, 2) the *Textus Receptus* differs from the majority text in “almost 2,000 places,” 3) no one had access to anything other than the majority text for 350 years between 1516 and 1881, and 4) the majority text was not readily available in Egypt for the first four centuries. (Wallace, IPNTTC, 30)
 - See Appendix A on page 9 to read this section authored by Dr. Wallace.
- It is important to note that many of Dr. Wallace’s comments are directed at Dr. Wilbur Pickering’s and the Majority Text position. It is also instructive to note that Dr. Wallace points out that “many” of the differences between the Majority Text and the *Textus Receptus* “are theologically significant.” (Wallace, IPNTTC, 30) Yet, we are expected to buy the notion that there are no theological differences at all between the Critical Text and *Textus Receptus*. The double standard is quite glaring.

Conclusion

- Deuteronomy 30:11-14—“For this commandment which I command thee this day, it *is* not hidden from thee, neither *is* it far off. 12) It *is* not in heaven, that thou shouldest say, Who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it unto us, that we may hear it, and do it? 13) Neither *is* it beyond the sea, that thou shouldest say, Who shall go over the sea for us, and bring it unto us, that we may hear it, and do it? 14) But the word *is* very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it.”
- Dr. Kent Brandenburg wrote an entire chapter on this passage for the book *Thou Shalt Keep Them: A Biblical Theology of the Perfect Preservation of Scripture*. Regarding these verses Brandenburg writes in part:
 - “These words, in their context, teach the doctrine of the general availability of all the Words of Scripture for every generation. . . Every generation of Israel needed the Words for the purpose of reviewing, remembering, believing, and practicing them. In Deuteronomy, they were told to remember them fourteen times, and ordered not to forget His Words nine times.” (Brandenburg in *Thou Shalt Keep Them*, 85-86)
- Verses 11 through 13 are negative and tell the reader what the commandment is not.
 - “Negatively, the commandment is not hidden, nor is it far off. The Hebrew words translated “not hidden” appear in many different ways in the KJB, but together they essentially mean “accessible,” hence, knowable. Words that are hidden might be in a library or buried in some ruin or desert. These qualities (“not hidden,” “nor far off”) certainly give a tangible quality to the commandment, written down and available in writing. Words far off could be those for which there is no available copy. They could be found in a museum in a display box in one location where the only people who could

see it would have to travel a great distance to do so. They could also just reside in heaven, which the text goes on to dismiss as a valid possibility. God-guaranteed access to the Words would not require passing over the sea. The negative section of vv. 11-13 overrules unavailability. Since hearing and doing is dependent on accessibility, the text promises that these Words will not be inaccessible.” (Brandenburg, 88-89)

- In contrast, verse 14 is positive; it states what the word “is.”
 - “Positively, the Word is nigh. It is close. The sufficient proximity of people to the Word is revealed by the further description of “. . . in thy mouth, and in thy heart. . .” in v. 14. The promise is repeated in the New Testament passage mentioned earlier (cf. Romans 10:6-8). “Mouth” and “heart” express the closest proximity. They express intimacy. They leave no room for an argument against the truth of the availability of God’s Words as a possible excuse for unbelief and disobedience. . . The reason for the availability or accessibility is that one “. . . may hear it, and do it” (vv. 12c, 13c), or that one “. . . mayest do it” (v. 14b).” (Brandenburg, 89-90)
- Deuteronomy 30:15-20 express the seriousness of why availability matters.
 - “Life, good, and ability to please God are dependent upon it. The potential consequences of unavailability, cursing and loss of blessing, stress the necessity for availability. The expression of punishment adds to the guarantee that His Words will be accessible. God is holy and just. He is merciful. There is a clear intimation in the blessings and curses that a holy, just, and merciful God will make sure that, with so much dependent on accessibility of His Words, He will make sure that they are available.” (Brandenburg, 90)
- From this we can see that Dr. Brandenburg deduces the following logical syllogism:
 - *Major Premise:* If it is necessary that His Words be available to every generation, then a holy and just God will ensure their availability.
 - *Minor Premise:* It is necessary.
 - *Conclusion:* God’s Words are available to every generation. (Brandenburg, 90)
- It is consistent with the believing viewpoint to maintain a belief that God’s word will be available to every generation.
- II Peter 3:2—“That ye may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us the apostles of the Lord and Saviour:”
 - Peter’s readers cannot be mindful “of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets” unless they were available and accessible to them. The call to remembrance assumes the availability of the Old Testament.

- Jude 17—“But, beloved, remember ye the words which were spoken before of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ;”
 - “The words of the Apostles, spoken before Jude wrote, are not part of the written record. . . This not only strongly implies that Jude has the Words of the apostles (the New Testament writings completed at that point in time), but also unequivocally states that believers to which he writes also had these words available.” (La More in *Thou Shalt Keep Them*, 93-94)

- Dr. Gary E. La More concludes his chapter in *Thou Shalt Keep Them* on the availability of scripture with the following paragraph:
 - “The apostles, in quoting the Old Testament, never questioned whether they had available the true Word of God. The apostles acknowledged that what others had written in the New Testament was also God’s Word. At the time of 2 Peter and Jude, the New Testament authors were not looking to verify what they had of the Old Testament as the true Word of God. Like all believers, they gladly received it. They were not looking for a lost Bible. God in His providence has seen to it that His Word was passed on from one generation to the next. The apostles received as authentic what they read and quoted from the Old Testament prophets as it had been passed on to them. True believers today should do the same thing. The correct and obvious interpretation of these texts and the implied belief of the apostles was that they had every Word God preserved and available to them. Based upon legitimate application of the text, the Lord’s true churches today have available to them not only the Words of the Old Testament prophets but also the Words of the New Testament apostles and other New Testament writers. The teaching of the availability of every Word of Scripture has been and continues to be a strong basis for opposing the attacks on the teaching of the Scripture by the apostles.” (La More, 94)

- For those who pay attention to the details, it is clear that God chose to preserve His word in a manner, i.e. copies, that allowed access to God’s word by the common man. Consequently, the musings of Combs on the subject of “public availability” and preservation appear to be designed to serve the position that he has already determined is the correct one.

- Availability and access to the scriptures are a logical conclusion of the Process of Preservation outlined in scripture. God’s word was preserved through the dynamic of people handling it, not in one copy sitting on a bookshelf for 500 or 1000 years. That is not the way God preserves His word. He preserves His word by it being in the hands of Bible believing people, and those people are charged with the responsibility to execute God’s purpose.

Works Cited

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Appendix A

Public accessibility of a pure text is a theological necessity

We have touched on this to some degree already—at least by way of analogy. But the argument is also contradicted by direct evidence. Pickering believes that "God *has* preserved the text of the New Testament in a very pure form and it has been readily available to His followers in every age throughout 1900 years. There are two fundamental problems with this view.

First, assuming that the majority text (as opposed to the TR) is the original, then this pure form of text has become available only since 1982. The Textus Receptus differs from it in almost 2,000 places and in fact has several readings which have "never been found in any known Greek manuscript," and scores, perhaps hundreds, of readings which depend on only a handful of very late manuscripts. Many of these passages are theologically significant texts. Yet virtually no one had access to any other text from 1516 to 1881, a period of over 350 years. In light of this, it is difficult to understand what Pickering means when he says that this pure text "has been readily available to [God's] followers in every age throughout 1900 years." Purity, it seems, has to be a relative term—and, if so, it certainly cannot be marshaled as a theological argument.

Second, again, assuming that the majority text is the original, and that it has been readily available to Christians for 1900 years, then it must have been readily available to Christians in Egypt in the first four centuries. But this is demonstrably not true, as we have already shown. Pickering speaks of our early Alexandrian witnesses as "polluted" and as coming from a "sewer pipe." Now if these manuscripts are really that defective, and if this is all Egypt had in the first three or four centuries, then this peculiar doctrine of preservation is in serious jeopardy, for those ancient Egyptian Christians had no access to the pure stream of the majority text. Therefore, if one were to define preservation in terms of the majority text, he would end up with a view which speaks very poorly of God's sovereign care of the text in ancient Egypt.

Wallace, Daniel B. "Inspiration, Preservation, And New Testament Textual Criticism" in *Grace Theological Journal*. 1992.