

Sunday, December 23, 2018—Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*  
Lesson 71 Approaches to Transmission: Preservation or Reconstruction

### Introduction

- Last week in Lesson 70 we looked at the connection between transmission and textual criticism. It is impossible to study the transmission of the text without discussing issues related to textual criticism.
- More importantly, we discussed at length the significance of one's governing presuppositions when engaging in a study of a text's transmission through history. Divergent presuppositions have resulted in two different types of textual criticism: 1) the fideistic (faith) approach of the "consistently Christian" method enunciated by Dr. Edward F. Hills in the *King James Version Defended* and 2) the "naturalistic" method that treats the Bible as though it were like any other book.
- In this lesson we want to consider how these two different types of textual criticism result in two fundamentally different approaches to the New Testament text. Simply stated, was the text preserved or was it lost and therefore in need of restoration?

### Two Different Approaches: Preservation or Reconstruction

- In Lesson 70 we quoted from Dr. Bart D. Ehrman's *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* in which he stated the following regarding the Biblical text:
  - "If one wants to insist that God inspired the very words of scripture, what would be the point if we don't have the very words of scripture? In some places, as we will see, **we** simply cannot be sure that we have **reconstructed the original text accurately**. It's a bit hard to know what the words of the Bible mean if we don't even know what the words are!" (Ehrman, 11)
- Ehrman's governing presuppositions (see Lesson 70) led him to believe that it was the job of text critics to "reconstruct" the text as though it had been lost. As believers, are we to be looking to "reconstruct" or "restore" the Biblical text or seeking to identify the text God has preserved?
- That depends upon one's presuppositions. If one's presuppositions are derived from scripture, then belief in the promise of preservation would not lead one to adopt a restorationist approach to the text. On the contrary, if one denies the promise of preservation or begins with naturalistic assumptions, they will indeed maintain that it is their job to identify and "restore" the Biblical text as though it had been lost.
- This debate between the preservationist approach and the reconstructionist approach encapsulates the entire textual and translational debate in a nut shell. Preservationist Dr. R.B. Ouellette explains the reasons why in his book *A More Sure Word: Which Bible Can You Trust?*

- “There are seminaries that exist today that seem to ‘explain away’ every verse that teaches preservation. I have a problem with some who feel that verses or doctrine must be ‘explained away.’ I prefer to read the Bible and understand it literally. When God says His word will last forever, that it will last for a thousand generations, I believe that means God will preserve His word forever.

In the Bible, the writers had no problem quoting Scripture that had been preserved up to that time. Peter quotes Isaiah 40 (I Peter 1:23-25); Paul quotes extensively from the Old Testament in Romans 9-11. Each time a New Testament writer quotes from the Old Testament, he is demonstrating that God has been able to preserve His word.

**Preservation is highly debated today because ultimately, the preservation issue will decide the translation issue—and preservation is completely a matter of faith in God’s power.”** (Ouellette, 33)

- In a later chapter, Ouellette summarizes his thoughts regarding preservation with the following statement:
  - “Those who advocate the Westcott and Hort position (i.e., the Critical Text) always have trouble with the preservation issue because it negates their practice. In the question of Bible translations, one either has a “preserved” Bible or a “**restored, reconstructed Bible.**” (Ouellette, 83)
- King James advocate Floyd Nolan Jones states the following regarding this question in his book *Which Version is the Bible?*
  - “The uncompromising stand is taken herein that God gave us His pure Word in the original autographs, and that He preserved it in its pure form unto this day—and will continue so doing forever. Indeed, preservation is the only issue separating the Biblicist from other professing Christians in this matter; yet, the traditional viewpoint has always been that God not only gave mankind His pure word but that He also assumed the oversight of its preservation as well [see the Westminster Confession and other Confessions of the Reformation era]. Over the years, this position has deteriorated and the contemporary view is that God has not protected the Scriptures, that they are not available in a pure form, and that this necessitates **their recovery by reconstructing them from the Greek manuscripts which have survived today.**” (Jones, 3-4)
- Elsewhere, speaking about contemporary scholarship Jones states,
  - “They have altered the crucial doctrine of **preservation** to that of **restoration**—and most text critics do not believe that such restoration is even any longer possible. . . Is it reasonable that God gave man His pure infallible Word and then allowed it to become so corrupted over time that He (we) was left to call and rely upon unregenerate men to restore it?” (Jones, 19-20)
- The loss, recovery, and reconstruction paradigm of modern textual critics is not derived from biblical presuppositions. Yet it has been the prevailing position among Christian academics and seminary professors since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. A survey of the titles of the following popular books written in the last thirty years on this topic bears this out.

- 1992—*The Quest for the Original Text of the New Testament* by Philip Wesley Comfort
- 2005—*The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration 4<sup>th</sup> Edition* by Bruce M. Metzger & Bart D. Ehrman
- 2007—*Searching for the Original Bible* by Randal Price
- 2011—*Revisiting the Corruption of the New Testament* by Daniel B. Wallace
- Given the constraints of time and space we will consider one example. Philip Wesley Comfort summarizes this approach to the New Testament text in the “Preface” to his 1992 publication *The Quest for the Original Text of the New Testament*:

- “. . . until this day I have not stopped my quest for **finding the original text** of the Greek New Testament.

. . . The New Testament text from its inception was pure and untainted, then—generally speaking—**went through a long process of textual corruption** (during which time there were a few scribes who produced copies that preserved much of the original text), then **began to be restored**.

. . . I have observed two conflicting views concerning the history of the transmission of the Greek New Testament. There are those who believe that the text was never corrupted and has never needed to be recovered. Unable to imagine that God would allow the text to become marred, they believe that God sovereignly preserved the original text in the majority of manuscripts. They defend the fidelity of the Textus Receptus and/or what is called today the Majority Text. This is the text, they say, that the church preserved throughout the ages and is therefore the text that contains the original wording.

. . . there are those who have another view about the history of the transmission of the Greek text. **They see it in light of a recovery**. They believe that the discovery of many early manuscripts in the past two centuries is an act of divine sovereignty because these manuscripts, being so much closer to the autographs, have provided the means **for scholars to recover a purer form of the original text**. . .

Our joy comes from seeing a **recovered New Testament text** and appreciate the work of those archeologists, paleographers and scholars who have searched for manuscripts in Egyptian ruins, deciphered the ancient text, and studied the manuscripts to determine what the inspired New Testament authors originally wrote. (Comfort, 9-11)

- Comfort views this “recovery model” as “biblical” by appealing to Adam’s fall into sin and subsequent restoration through the work of Christ as well as Israel’s repeated falls into idolatry followed by subsequent restoration under the ministry of the judges. (Comfort, 10) On this basis, Comfort alleges that viewing the New Testament text as having been “lost” and in need of “restoration” by 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century textual critics is a biblical or faith-based approach. In the meantime, Comfort dismisses the claims of preservationists because the *textus receptus* is based upon corrupted late or more recent Byzantine manuscripts. Comfort’s dismissal of the majority Greek witness that was in use in the churches of the Reformation in favor of a “purer” text is based upon older witnesses even though they were not used by the body of Christ until the late

19<sup>th</sup> century. If Comfort's position is correct, it would mean that the body of Christ did not have access to the correct text of the New Testament until it was restored by text critics in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This would mean, by implication, that the body of Christ did not have the correct text available to them for nearly 1800 years of the church's existence.

- Comfort is unique in that he attempts to give his restoration paradigm a biblical flavor whereas other advocates of the restorationists model such as Daniel B. Wallace advocate for a textual method that is completely “neutral” or devoid of any faith-based presuppositions.
- The bottom line for Comfort is the following: 1) the text was corrupted and lost, 2) it needs to be found, recovered and restored, and 3) only modern scholars are in position to accomplish this on account of modern textual discoveries. Once again, the implication is clear, those living before the 19<sup>th</sup> century were incapable of accessing the pure word of God because the oldest MSS had not yet been discovered and deciphered. Practically, this would have left believers without the “purest” form of the text for most of the dispensation of grace if the assertions of modern text critics are correct. In the end, Comfort is arguing for the doctrine of *providential restoration* not preservation.
- Dr. Theodore P. Letis in his book *The Ecclesiastical Text: Text Criticism, Biblical Authority and Popular Mind* explains how and when this shift from providential preservation to providential restoration occurred. The change occurred during the crucible of controversy that existed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and was publicly played out at Princeton Theological Seminary with the issue of the verbal inspiration of scripture. In their 1881 essay “Inspiration” for the *Presbyterian Review*, A.A. Hodge and B.B. Warfield sought to defend the Westminster Confession of Faith on post-Enlightenment terms set by their opponents.
  - “Warfield had to admit, along with all post-Enlightenment critics, that in text critical matters, the Bible was to be treated like any other kind of literature. He had also to maintain, however, that it was the verbally inspired Word of God. . . Warfield’s answer was to,

Not assert that the common text, but only that the original autographic text was inspired. No “error” can be asserted, therefore, which cannot be proved to have been in the original text.

Furthermore, Warfield provided an ingenious new interpretation of the Westminster Confession of Faith that would allow him to claim creedal validation for the new criticism. The confession which had once taught the *providential preservation* of the extant texts, was now used to affirm the *providential restoration* of an inerrant original text, by means of modern text criticism. Because he argued,

We believe in God’s continuous care over the purity of His Word, we are able to look upon the labors of the great critics of the nineteenth century—a Tregelles, a Westcott, a Hort—. . . as instruments of providence in preserving [read: restoring] the Scriptures pure for use of God’s people.”

This, then, is how Warfield accomplished his weighty task: if the correct interpretation of the WCF was, in Warfield’s opinion, that it taught the locus of providence was now restoration, via Enlightenment criticism, rather than preservation of the traditional texts, then we need not concern ourselves with the criticisms lodged at the human element in the text of Scripture presently (and historically) used in the Church. This stance allowed

Warfield to actually join with the critics of the Princeton position as God’s providential agents in the task of restoring the inerrant original, now the new locus of both inspiration and providence.” (Letis, 21-22)

- Later Dr. Letis states the following regarding Warfield:
  - “. . . Warfield persuaded nearly everyone within the old Princeton tradition, during the heat of the dispute, that his apologetic technique was correct. It placed Scripture forever beyond the reach of antagonistic critics since only the **yet to be reconstructed** autographic text could be criticized. . .” (Letis, 26)
- In support of these statements, Letis quotes the following from the pen of Warfield:
  - “The autographic text of the New Testament is distinctly within the reach of criticism. . . we cannot despair of **restoring** to ourselves and the Church of God, His book, word for word, as He gave it by inspiration to men.” (quoted in Letis, 27)
- There are multiple problems with the position explicated by Warfield and Comfort. First, it ignores what the Bible teaches about itself with respect to preservation. Second, it is unscientific and unfalsifiable because it judges all the surviving data based upon a standard that not only does not exist but that no living person has ever seen. It proves nothing to argue that the truthfulness of the surviving manuscripts can only be determined by the original autographs which no one, by their own admission, possesses.
- Logically, this line of argumentation can only arrive at the conclusion that the so-called original text that modern text critics are trying to locate and restore is an illusion. In the absence of the original autographs, the inerrant standard according to Warfield and virtually all modern scholars, how does one know that they have totally, wholly, and completely recovered and restored autographic text? The answer is that they cannot. So, it turns out that the so-called science of New Testament textual criticism is not very scientific after all.
- The ever-changing nature of the modern Critical Text bears this out. It is currently available in two different editions: 1) the *Nestle-Aland Text* (NA) and 2) the *United Bible Society Text* (UBS). The NA text is presently in its 28<sup>th</sup> edition (NA28) while the UBS issued its 5<sup>th</sup> edition (UBS5). While the differences between these two editions in terms of their main texts are only slight (they differ more in terms of their critical apparatus), they are emblematic of the unsettled nature of the New Testament text according to modern textual critics. In short, they can never be completely sure that they have accurately restored/reconstructed the text so they are constantly tweaking it and releasing new editions based upon new textual discoveries.
- According to Kurt and Barbara Aland’s (the go-to folks in New Testament textual criticism) *The Text of the New Testament*, there are at least 31, possibly as many as 39, complete verses that should not be in the Bible. (see pages 306-311)
  - Matthew—5:44, 6:13, 16:2b-3, 17:21, 18:11, 20:16, 20:22-23, 23:14, 25:13, 27:354
  - Mark—7:16, 9:44, 9:46, 11:26, 15:28
  - Luke—4:4, 9:54-56, 17:36, 23:17, 24:24

- John 5:3b-4
- Acts 8:37, 15:34, 24:6b-8, 28:16, 28:29
- Even the editors of the Greek New Testament behind virtually all modern versions self-graded their choices regarding what the readings should be. According to the preface of the latest edition of the Greek text published by the United Bible Society (UBS5) the grading system works as follows:
  - A—Indicates the text is certain;
  - B—Indicates the text is almost certain;
  - C—Indicates the text is difficult to determine;
  - D—Indicates the text is very difficult to determine. ([Ballard](#))
- In other words, professional text critics, by their own admission, can never be completely sure that they have recovered/reconstructed the autographic text. If one pays close attention, they will run across instances of extreme candor on the part of the men doing the textual work to “reconstruct” the original text. One such instance is provided by Eldon J. Epp, Professor of Biblical Literature at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio. In addition to serving as the president for the Society of Biblical Literature from 2003 to 2004, Professor Epp also coauthored *Studies in the Theory and Method of New Testament Textual Criticism* (1993) with Gordon D. Fee. As an expert and recognized authority in the field of New Testament textual criticism, Professors Epp and Fee stated the following:
  - “. . . we no longer think so simplistically or so confidently about recovering “the New Testament in the Original Greek.

The present question raised seven years ago was what progress have we made in the twentieth century in this broad area of theory and history, for we seem to have been unable to formulate a theory of the NT text that would explain and justify the modern critical text, which coincidentally or otherwise, still stands so close to that of the preceding century, and, in addition, we remain largely in the dark as to how we might reconstruct the textual history that has left in its wake—in the form of MSS and fragments—numerous pieces that we seem incapable of fitting together. Westcott-Hort, von Soden, and others have sweeping theories (which we have largely rejected) to undergird their critical texts, but we seem to have no such theories and no plausible sketches of the early history of the text that are widely accepted. What progress, then, have we made? Are we more advanced than our predecessors, after showing their theories to be unacceptable, we offer no such theories at all to vindicate our accepted text? Hardly! As a matter of fact, our failure becomes all the more glaring in juxtaposition with the abundance of newly found materials and fresh knowledge.” (Epp and Fee, 114-115)
- Likewise, professional text critic Bart D. Ehrman states the following in *Misquoting Jesus*:
  - “One of the leading questions that textual critics must deal with is how to get back to the original text—the text as the author first wrote it—given the circumstance that our manuscripts are so full of mistakes. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that once a

mistake was made, it could become firmly embedded in the textual tradition, more firmly embedded, in fact, than the original.

. . . Given these problems, how can we hope to get back to anything like the original text, the text that an author actually wrote? It is an enormous problem. In fact, it is such an enormous problem that a number of textual critics have started to claim that we may as well suspend any discussion of the “original” text, because it is inaccessible to us.” (Ehrman, 57-58)

- This indecision on the part of textual criticism as to the nature of the underlying Greek text has led to indecision among the translators and publishers of modern versions. The editors and committees responsible to produce modern versions are in agreement about some of these but not all. The following is a list of verses that are placed in the text in brackets thereby showing their doubtful authenticity. So, they are (by modern textual criticism standards) probably impure forgeries yet they are still placed within the text.
  - Mark—10:7, 10:21, 10:24, 14:68
  - Luke –8:43, 22:43-44
- The fact that the editors and committees that produce and publish modern versions cannot agree with each other about what verses should and should not be in the Bible highlights an important point,
  - “The experts are all in competition with each other. They all claim that it’s their mandate to update the “Word of God” or “The Bible” into a language you can understand, and yet they can’t even agree on which verses they should translate, let alone how they should be translated.” (McElroy, 291)
- In the end, the only things textual critics and experts are certain of are the following:
  - God did not preserve His word but rather allowed it to be lost and corrupted.
  - Biblical presuppositions should be checked at the door when conducting textual criticism in favor of a so-called neutral approach i.e., the Bible should be treated like any other book.
  - The text of the Reformation, the *Textus Receptus*, is corrupt because of its reliance on late Byzantine MSS.
  - The King James Bible is not the word of God for English speaking people.
  - Only the lost original autographs are inspired, infallible, and inerrant.
  - It is the job of neutral textual criticism to locate, recover, and reconstruct the New Testament text from the oldest available witness that became available to the body Christ in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.
  - There is not a tangible book in existence today that can rightly be called the infallible word of God, according to the prevailing thoughts of Christian academia.

## Conclusion: Certainty vs. Uncertainty

- In his 1995 publication *The King James Only Controversy: Can You Trust the Modern Translations?*, James R. White asserts that “the desire for *absolute certainty*” is the “glue” that holds the King James Only position [note that I reject KJO as a descriptor for my position] together. (White, 93) When speaking about the position enunciated by Dr. Edward F. Hills in the *King James Version Defended*, White states the following:
  - “But another argument precluded his coming to any conclusions other than the ones he presented, and that was the “argument for certainty” as I call it. This argument is the “glue” that holds the KJV Only position together. It is the common thread that ties Dr. Hills to someone as completely different in approach and mannerism as Dr. Ruckman.” (White, 93)
- White then proceeds to quote the following from Dr Hills to support this notion:
  - “In short, unless we follow the logic of faith, we can be certain of nothing concerning the Bible and its text. For example, if we make the Bodmer and Chester Beatty Papyri our chief reliance, how do we know that even older New Testament papyri of an entirely different character have not been destroyed by the recent damming of the Nile and the consequent flooding of the Egyptians sands.” (Hills, 225 quoted by White on page 93)
- First, one needs to understand Hills in context. Hills is saying that unless one takes a faith-based approach to textual criticism, the New Testament text will never be settled entirely because future MSS discoveries will always throw things into flux. In the mind of Hills, an ever-fluctuating text is unacceptable because there could never be any certainty as to what God actually said. For Hills this is unacceptable because of the doctrine of divine preservation. It is not consistent with a faith-based approach to the text to think that God wants believers to be uncertain as to the text of scripture.
- Second, we need to observe how White mangles Hills to advance his own argument for “absolute certainty” as it pertains to the King James Only movement. Immediately following the quote from Hills, White states:
  - “The desire for *absolute certainty* in all matters plainly lies behind statements such as this, and the much less polished (and more emotional) version of the same arguments that are encountered in less scholarly KJV Only materials.”
- Dr. Theodore P. Letis, author of *The Ecclesiastical Text*, points out that through this rhetorical maneuver, White has lumped the Harvard trained Ph.D. (Hills) in with a female home economics teacher (Riplinger). More importantly Dr. Letis points out the gross way White misrepresented Hills. On the matter of textual certainty Hills stated the following:
  - “In other words, God does not reveal every truth with equal clarity. In biblical textual criticism, as in every department of knowledge, there are still some details in regard to which we must be content to remain uncertain. But the special providence of God has kept these uncertainties down to a *minimum*. Hence, if we believe it is the special providential preservation of the Scriptures and make this the leading principle of our biblical textual criticism, we obtain *maximum certainty*, all the certainty that any mere man can obtain, all the certainty that we need. For we are led by the logic of faith to the



Masoretic Hebrew text, to the New Testament Textus Receptus, and to the King James Version.” (Hills, 224)

- There is a big difference between “maximum certainty” (Hills) and “absolute certainty” (White), maximum is not absolute. White is ascribing to Hills something Hills never said. Regarding the matter, Dr. Letis states the following regarding the position of Dr. Hills:
  - “Here we see an example of a classically trained text critic, well familiar with the rules of semantics, of logic and, of rhetoric, offering a finely tuned and nuanced argument in one direction, while Mr. White publicly misrepresents him, steering him down a path Dr. Hills was consciously repudiating, and advocating that others avoid. The irony of Mr. White’s earlier homily on honesty is palpable.” (Letis, 228)
- If a position regarding transmission/textual criticism based upon the presupposition of preservation provides “maximum certainty” as to the identity of the New Testament text, then what would a paradigm predicated on the assumptions of loss, recovery, and reconstruction produce? It would bequeath to the body of Christ a position of “maximum uncertainty,” or a Bible that was only as certain as the latest archeological discoveries.
- Therefore, in conclusion, we observe the following regarding the two different approaches to transmission discussed in the lesson.
  - Preservationist Approach = Maximum Certainty
  - Reconstructionist Approach = Maximum Uncertainty

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