

Sunday, February 10, 2019—Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*
Lesson 76 Verbatim Identicality Case Study: William W. Combs & Richard Flanders

Introduction

- In Lessons 70 through 72 we considered foundational aspects of transmission by looking at the importance of presuppositions and how they impact one's approach to the textual criticism. With that accomplished, in [Lesson 73](#) we embarked on a discussion of other basic matters related to the topic. Before laying out some principles for discerning, locating, or identifying the preserved text in history, it was deemed prudent to consider the following basic points regarding transmission:
 - Materials Used in Transmission
 - Witnesses to the New Testament Text
 - False Assumptions Concerning Transmission
 - Scribal Errors & Corruption
- Since Lesson 73, we have been studying some basic issues related to transmission before laying out some principles for discerning, locating, and identifying the preserved text in history. Thus far, we have considered the following topics:
 - Material Used in Transmission & Witness to the New Testament Text ([Lesson 73](#))
 - False Assumptions Concerning Transmission (Lessons [74](#) and [75](#))
- In Lessons 74 and 75 we discussed the notion that transmission occurred, or needed to occur, with *verbatim identicality* of wording as the greatest false assumption one can make when discussing the Biblical text and its preservation/transmission. Recall the following statement from the conclusion of Lesson 75:
 - “The greatest false assumption that needs to be avoided in any discussion of textual transmission is one that requires *verbatim identicality* of wording as the standard for preservation. This false assumption has caused men to err in one of two directions: 1) deny the promise of preservation and limit inspiration, infallibility, and inerrancy to the non-existent original autographs or 2) misconstrue the promise of preservation as requiring *verbatim identicality* of wording and thereby adopt positions on the KJB that do not square with the historical and textual facts.”
- Today, in Lesson 76, we want to consider Matthew 5:17-18, a passage often used by King James Only believers, to support their belief in plenary preservation or the *exact* preservation of every word with no differences of any kind. This lesson will serve as a case study for what happens when one demands *verbatim identicality* as the standard of preservation/transmission. It will also demonstrate the how assumption of *verbatim identicality* has led Critical Text supporters to embrace the Originals Only position.

Verbatim Identity Case Study: William W. Combs & Richard Flanders

- Dr. William W. Combs of Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary is the author of an essay titled “The Preservation of Scripture” (See Lessons 28 through 56 for a detailed analysis of this essay.). In this essay, among other things, Dr. Combs points out that the textual facts do not seem to matter to most King James Only adherents, “So we see that the evidence of manuscripts, texts, and versions means nothing to those in the KJV/TR camp.” (Combs 35) Most are content to double down on faith for faith’s sake in the promise of preservation.
- Matthew 5:17-18 is often used by King James Onlyists to support the notion of *plenary* or *verbatim* preservation. Please see Lessons [44](#) and [45](#) for a full discussion of this passage.
- Combs commences his discussion of Matthew 5:17-18 by noting that the passage “is one of the most commonly referenced passages used to support the preservation of Scripture.” Moreover, he identifies the “jot” and “tittle” as follows:
 - Jot—“It is universally agreed that the “jot” (ἰῶτα *iota*) refers to the Hebrew (or Aramaic) letter ך̄ (*yôd*), the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet.” (Combs, 21)
 - Tittle—“The “tittle” (κεραία *keraiia*) literally means “horn,” that is, a “projection” or “hook.” This is often been understood to refer to small parts of letters, especially to small strokes distinguishing Hebrew letters.” (Combs, 21)
- When taken at face value, Combs concedes that the phrase “could be understood to teach an absolutely perfect preservation of the “Law”. (21) Combs then cites Richard Flanders’ essay [“Does the Bible Promise Its Own Preservation”](#) as a case in point. Flanders wrote:
 - “Some say that this promise refers only to the fulfillment of scripture and not to its preservation. But notice that it says the text of the Bible (to the very letter) will not “pass” in the sense that “heaven and earth” shall one day “pass.” The Greek word used here for “pass” is *parelthe*, and it refers to the physical extinction of the thing that shall pass. It can also be translated “perish.” Just as God’s creation will pass someday, God’s Words will never pass! **The actual existence of the original text of scripture will continue eternally**, just as the physical existence of heaven and earth will not continue.” (Quoted in Combs, 21)
- Mark well the nature of Flanders’ position. He makes two important assertions: 1) “the text of the Bible to the very letters and punctuation marks will not “pass” away and 2) “the actual existence of the original text of scripture will continue eternally”. How is this accomplished according to Flanders? By preservation of course. If this is not a statement arguing for *verbatim* preservation, I am not sure what is.
- Combs is quick to jump on this point in his comments following the Flanders’ citation:

- “Flanders’s interpretation is just how Matthew 5:18 is commonly understood from the KJV/TR viewpoint. Cloud explains: “In summary, the Bible promises that God will preserve His Word in pure form, including the most minute details (the jots and tittles [*sic*], the words), and that this would include the whole Scriptures, Old and New Testaments. The biblical doctrine of preservation is **verbal, plenary preservation...**” Waite describes this as the “**inerrant preservation of the Words of the Bible.**” But, in fact, these advocates of KJV/TR position do not actually take Matthew 5:18 literally, even though they claim to do so. If not one “jot” or “tittle” is to be changed, then they should insist on using only the 1611 edition of the KJV since “jot” and “tittle” certainly involve spelling, and there have been thousands of spelling changes since 1611.” (Combs, 21-22)
- Combs has just pointed out something the King James Only advocates have not dealt with honestly, in my opinion. If they are going to demand *verbatim identity* to every “jot and tittle”, which edition of the KJB exactly reproduced the original autographs. As we will see below, even Flanders is forced to hedge on this point later in his essay.
- Now Combs has the King James Only advocates positioned right where he wants them in order to deliver what he thinks is a final deciding FACTUAL blow.
 - “There are two things to be said about the KJV/TR interpretation of Matthew 5:18. First, it is an *incontrovertible fact*, obvious to anyone who has examined the manuscript evidence, that we do not now possess the words of the autographs in an absolutely inerrant state. This assertion is most significant since it flatly contradicts the whole thesis of the KJV/TR position. I will demonstrate the truth of this assertion later in this essay. Second, Jesus is not teaching in this verse the “inerrant preservation of the Words of the Bible.”” (Combs, 22)
- Let us now dissect Combs’ statement. First, Combs is correct, we cannot know for certain what the words of the original were; if one demands *verbatim identity* as their standard for preservation and inerrancy. Moreover, he is correct that this fact alone causes the King James Only notion that Matthew 5:17-18 is teaching *exact identity* of wording (to the very jots and tittles) as the standard for preservation to suffer damage. Even within the Byzantine text-type, the textual tradition that King James advocates favor as the preserved text line, there is not *verbatim identity* of wording. The same could be said for the printed editions of the TR as well as the various editions of the KJB itself. In this way, the King James Only position is unscriptural because it demands more for the doctrine of preservation than what the Bible actually asserts.
- Second, what is Combs’ standard for speaking about “an absolutely inerrant state?” It is none other than the standard of *verbatim identity*. While Combs is correct in his criticism of the King James Only position, on the other side of the spectrum he is arguing for the absolute inerrancy of the original autographs that no longer exist and which no one alive has ever seen. What verse of scripture teaches one to believe that God confined His inspired and inerrant word to some non-existent MSS?

- In this way both sides are making unscriptural assumptions and talking past each other with the assumed standard of *verbatim identically* being the great mount impassible that divides them. Recall from previous Lessons that the language “in the original autographs” was added to Protestant doctrinal statements in the latter half of the 19th century as a means of answering German Higher Critics and Enlightenment Rationalism. In this way, Protestants reworked their position on the Bible based upon terms set by their opponents. This reworked Bibliology became the new orthodoxy in Fundamental and Evangelical circles in the 20th century. In the same way that Protestant scholars in the 19th century overreacted to the forces of liberalism; believers in the 20th century overreacted to the new “Originals Only” orthodoxy within Evangelicalism by overstating their case in the opposite direction. Therefore, cordial and productive dialogue on this topic has proved elusive. Both sides are separated by the same thing (the false assumption that preservation requires *verbatim identity*), do not realize it, and are therefore talking past each other.
- The position I am arguing for in this class is both scriptural as well as logical and in line with the historical and textual facts. The scriptures assert their own inspiration and preservation which means we must have more than the non-existent original autographs. The scriptures do not, however, teach *verbatim identity* as the standard for preservation/transmission.
- Above, we saw that Combs quoted Richard Flanders’ article “[Does the Bible Promise Its Own Preservation](#)” to buttress his point regarding the use of Matthew 5:17-18 by some King James Only believers. A deeper look at the Flanders’ article will prove instructive. Flanders offers the connection between the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Hebrew Masoretic Text as historical proof of the promise of preservation as well as the existence of the Traditional Hebrew supporting the KJB from before the time of Christ (50 BC). Flanders quotes Drs. Gleason Archer and Randell Price to support his conclusion:
 - Archer—“. . . the Hebrew University Isaiah Scroll [of the Dead Sea Scrolls] . . . corresponds **almost letter for letter** with the [traditional text] . . . and yet dates from 50 B.C.” (Reproduced from Flanders)
 - Price—“Once a comparison was made between the text of the Isaiah Scroll and the Masoretic Text [the traditional Hebrew text], it was evident that, **except for minor details (such as spelling)** that do not affect the meaning of the text, the two were **almost identical** . . . It confirmed the accuracy with which the scribes had carefully preserved and transmitted the biblical text through time.” (Reproduced from Flanders)
- Please note that citations of Archer and Price provided by Flanders do not quite support Flanders’ position. Above we quoted Flanders as saying the following with respect to Matthew 5:17-18; “But notice that it says the text of the Bible (to the very letter) will not “pass” in the sense that “heaven and earth” shall one day “pass.”” But later in the same essay, when seeking to furnish historical proof of “jot and tittle” preservation, Flanders quotes two scholars who stop short of the *verbatim identity* of wording that Flanders had previously used Matthew 5:17-18 to argue for as the standard for preservation.

- Next, note the underlined portion of the quote from Price. Price admits that one does not need *verbatim identity* of wording in order for the text to convey the exact same meaning without possessing the exact same words.
- Without realizing the inconsistencies in his argumentation following the quotes by Archer and Price, Flanders goes on to highlight a very interesting point in the opposite direction. Consider what he says about the nature of textual variants:
 - “To my friend, however, and many scholars like him, the most significant find at the Dead Sea in regard to the Bible’s text **was the existence of variant texts!** The principles of modern textual criticism are based on the assumption that the **exact preservation** of the original text of an ancient document is extremely unlikely.” (Flanders)
- This statement on the part of Flanders highlights precisely why modern textual critics adopt a reconstructionist approach to the text. They do not believe in the promise of preservation because preservation did not occur with *exact identity*.
- At this point, it might be good to remind everyone regarding the definition of the English word “preservation.” Noah Webster defined the word as follows in the *American Dictionary of English Language*.
 - “The act of preserving or keeping safe; the act of keeping from injury, destruction or decay; as the *preservation* of life or health; the *preservation* of buildings from fire or decay; the *preservation* of grain from insects; the *preservation* of fruit or plants. When a thing is kept entirely from decay, **or nearly in its original state**, we say it is in a high state of *preservation*.”
- Even according to the English dictionary, something does not have to be kept in an *exactly identical* state or condition in order to qualify as having been preserved.
- For many King James Only authors, such as Dr. D.A. Waite, any difference of any kind in terms of wording constitutes a situation where one is forced to declare which reading is the Word of God.
 - “Thus, one cannot honestly, according to Waite, say that the NASB is the Word of God. He complains that if one holds “his King James in his hand and the New American Standard in his hand with 5,604 differences in their Greek texts in the New Testament alone, how can they both be the ‘Word’ of God? ‘Word of God’ could not mean the ‘Words of God’ because of these differences in the Words.”” (Dr. Waite quoted in Combs, 36)
- Dr. Waite fails to distinguish between the nature of these differences. I reject the Critical Text and the NASB because many of these 5,604 differences are substantive in nature, not merely different ways of saying the same thing. But, mark well, that is not what Waite is saying. He is

making the categorical statement that any difference of wording of any kind is an attack on the Word of God. The problem here is one of consistency. The printed editions of the KJB contain different wording yet Waite is not willing to identify which edition of the KJB got all the words “perfect” or *exactly* correct in every detail.

- Professor Combs concludes his section on “The Extent of Preservation” with the following paragraph.
 - “The true situation is this: God has preserved his Word to this day, but because of the means he has chosen to use to accomplish this preservation—providentially, through secondary causation—the words of the autographs have not been inerrantly preserved. Instead, God has chosen to allow for variations to occur—variants within the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek copies of the autographs. God has providentially provided all these copies in order to preserve the Scriptures. So it is proper to say that preservation has taken place in the totality of manuscripts. Because God chose this method of preservation, it was not possible to provide a perfectly pure text with no variations (errors). It was sufficient for God’s purpose to preserve his Word in copies of the autographs whose exact wording contains some variation. This level of purity is sufficient for God’s purposes.” (Combs, 37)
- In the end, Combs is partly right and partly wrong. Combs doubles down in the opposite direction of Waite. He insists that “the words of the autographs have not been inerrantly preserved” because he is assuming *verbatim identity* as his standard for inerrant preservation. Therefore, according to Combs, inerrancy is only applicable to the original autographs. Combs insistence upon *exact identity* of wording is reiterated in his statement that “it was not possible to provide a perfectly pure text with no variations.” For Combs, the mere presence of textual variants negates perfect/inerrant preservation because of how he is using those words.
- I also disagree with Combs’ conclusion that preservation occurred in the “totality of manuscripts.” This is not possible since some of the manuscript copies do possess substantive differences in meaning and, in some cases, teach opposites.

Conclusion

- Even Dr. Edward F. Hills, an outspoken advocate of providential preservation, acknowledges that demanding *verbatim identity* as the standard of preservation is demanding more than one can prove.
 - “If the doctrine of the divine inspiration of the Old and New Testament Scriptures is a true doctrine, the doctrine of the providential preservation of the Scriptures must also be a true doctrine. 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** [note that Hills stops short of demanding *verbatim identity* of wording] **of the original text have been available to God’s people in every age.** God must have done this, for if He gave the Scriptures to His

Church by inspiration as the perfect and final revelation of His will, then it is obvious that **He would not allow this revelation to disappear or undergo any alteration of its fundamental character** [preservation secures the transmission of the substantive doctrinal content of the text without demanding *exact identity* of wording].” (Hills, 2)

- When God promised to preserve His word, did He know that the printing press would not be invented until 1455 A.D.? Did God know that for much of the history of the dispensation of grace His word would be preserved and transmitted through handwritten copies of the Biblical documents that would be subject to both accidental and intentional errors? Did God know that during the copying process the originals would not be transmitted with *exact identity*? The answer to all these questions is “yes.” God, in His foreknowledge, knew all these things yet He still promised to preserve His word.
- Consequently, our understanding of what the Word of God is ought to not be different from His. God does not require *verbatim identity* of wording in order to fulfill His promise of preservation. Therefore, we should not demand more of the promise of preservation than God does. Human reason and rationality, even within the King James Only camp, has served to bind God’s Word up (Pure Cambridge Position) in a manner that is contrary to how the King James Bible itself would teach one to think about the matter.
- I believe in “perfect” preservation and/or transmission if, by perfect, one means:
 - The existence of a **pure text** (Psalm 12:6-7) that does not report information about God, His nature or character, His doctrine, His dispensational dealings with mankind, history, archeology, or science that is FALSE. In short, God’s promise to preserve His Word assures the existence of a text that has not been altered in its *character* or *doctrinal content* despite not being preserved in a state of *verbatim identity*.
- In the past I believed that Matthew 5:17-18 taught *verbatim identity* of wording as the standard for preservation. When I taught the series *Final Authority: Locating God’s Word in English* at Grace Life Bible Church in 2010, I used Matthew 5:17-18 to assert the notion that preservation took place with *exact identity*. Now in the light of further research and study I would no longer hold to my former position on Matthew 5:17-18. This does not mean, however, that I do not believe in the fundamental promise of preservation.
- Matthew 5:17-18 is simply teaching that no detail of the law is going to go unfulfilled by the Lord Jesus Christ. He was the perfect fulfillment of ALL the righteous requirements of the law down to the very smallest details.
- If God intended to preserve and transmit His word with *verbatim identity*, we would have historical and textual evidence that preservation/transmission occurred with that level of precision. No such evidence exists.

- This does not mean that one must abandon belief in the promise of preservation in the face of variant readings. Rather, it means that one must amend their understanding of preservation/transmission to match what the Bible teaches about the matter.

Works Cited

Combs, William W. "The Preservation of Scripture?" in *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal*. Fall 2000.

Flanders, Richard. [*Does the Bible Promise its Own Preservation*](#).