

Sunday, March 3, 2019—Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*
 Lesson 79 Do Variant Readings Impact Doctrine: Mark 16 and the Ascension of Christ?

Introduction

- Last week in [Lesson 78](#) we concluded our discussion of *Textual Variants and Corruption* that we began in [Lesson 77](#). In doing so, we concluded the following:
 - “I believe that substantive alterations would not have been made by Bible believing people who were seeking to faithfully copy and transmit God’s word. The believing viewpoint is that, while the faithful were not kept wholly from variance in the copying of the scriptures, they would not have sought to intentionally alter the substantive doctrinal content of the text and thereby corrupt God’s word. To behave in such a manner would have been a violation of the precepts of the very text they were endeavoring to transmit.” (Lesson 78)
- In terms of how to define an “error” or “corruption” we presented the following definition:
 - “When one Biblically amends their position on preservation (See Lessons 42, 43, 74, 75, and 76) and thereby realizes that preservation did not occur with verbatim identity, it brings the entire discussion on the extent of preservation and transmission into focus. On this amended view, an “error” or “corruption” would constitute a variant that substantively alters the doctrinal content of the Biblical text. Variants that constitute a different way of saying the same thing or do not substantively alter the doctrine of the Bible (which would be the vast majority according to the leading scholars in the field) are not “errors” because they are substantively equivalent.” (Lesson 78)
- In this Lesson we want to consider the often-repeated claim by Evangelical text critics that no textual variants impact any “fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith.” We will do this by using Mark 16:9-20 as a case study.

Do Variant Readings Impact Doctrine: Mark 16 and the Ascension of Christ?

- Leading Evangelical scholars such as Daniel B. Wallace and James R. White assure us that no textual variant substantively impacts any point of Christian doctrine. Quotations expressing the same sentiment as the one enunciated below could be multiplied many times over from the writings of modern Christian academics.
 - “The simple fact of the matter is that **no textual variants** in either the Old or New Testaments in any way, shape, or form materially disrupt or destroy any essential doctrine of the Christian faith. That is a fact that any semi-impartial review will substantiate.” (White, 40)
- Former Evangelical and fellow textual critic Bart D. Ehrman offers a much different analysis in the conclusion to his book *Misquoting Jesus*:

- “To be sure, of all the hundreds of thousands of textual changes found among our manuscripts, most of them are completely insignificant, immaterial, or of no real importance for anything other than showing that scribes could not spell or keep focused any better than the rest of us. It would be wrong, however, to say—as people sometimes do—that the changes in our texts have no real bearing on what the texts mean or on the theological conclusions that one draws from them. We have seen, in fact, that just the opposite is the case. In some instances, the very meaning of the text is at stake, depending on how one resolves a textual problem: Was Jesus an angry man [Mark 1:41]? Was he completely distraught in the face of death [Hebrews 2:9]? Did he tell his disciples that they could drink poison without being harmed [Mark 16:9-20]? Did he let an adulteress off the hook with nothing but a mild warning [John 7:53-8:11]? Is the doctrine of the Trinity explicitly taught in the New Testament [I John 5:7-8]? Is Jesus actually called the “unique God” there [John 1:18]? Does the New Testament indicate that even the Son of God himself does not know when the end will come [Matthew 24:36]? The questions go on and on, and all of them are related to how one resolves difficulties in the manuscript tradition as it has come down to us.” (Ehrman, 207-208)
- In this citation Ehrman identifies seven passages that are impacted in a theologically substantive way based upon which reading is deemed authentic by text critics.
- On page 44 of his essay “How Badly Did the Scribes Corrupt the New Testament Text” found in *Revisiting the Corruption of the New Testament*, Dr. Wallace quotes the above passage from *Misquoting Jesus*. Recall that in Lesson 72 we outlined five points of harmony/agreement that Dr. Wallace has with Dr. Ehrman concerning the New Testament text. These five points of agreement include:
 - “1. The handwritten copies of the NT contain a lot of differences. We are not sure exactly what the number is, but the best estimate is somewhere between 300,000 and 400,000 variants. This means, as Ehrman is fond of saying, that there are more variants in the MSS than there are words in the NT.
 - 2. The vast bulk of these differences affect virtually nothing.
 - 3. We concur on the wording of the original text almost all the time.
 - 4. We are even in harmony over several well-known or controversial passages:
 - Mark 16:9-20—Here Jesus tells his disciples that they can drink poison and handle snakes and not get hurt. I agree with Ehrman that this passage is not part of the original text of Mark.
 - John 7:53-8:11—We both agree that the story of the woman caught in adultery was not part of the original text of John. It is my favorite passage that is *not* in the Bible.

- I John 5:7—The King James Bible says, “For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one.” This would be the most explicit statement about the Trinity in the Bible, but it is definitely not part of the original text. This fact has been known by scholars for more than half a millennium.
- Mark 1:41—Although most MSS here say that Jesus was moved with compassion when he healed the leper; we both agree that the original text probably said that he was angry when he did so. One of Ehrman’s finest pieces is his provocatively titled article “A Leper in the Hands of an Angry Jesus.” He there gave very strong evidence that Mark 1:41 spoke of Jesus’ anger rather than his compassion. I agree.

5. We both are of the same mind that the orthodox scribes occasionally changed the NT text to bring it more into conformation with their views.” (Wallace, 20-21)

- Note that of the seven passages of doctrinal significance noted by Ehrman in the conclusion to *Misquoting Jesus* (see quotation above), Wallace agrees with him concerning four of them: 1) Mark 16:9-20; 2) John 7:53-8:11; 3) I John 5:7; and 4) Mark 1:41. Regarding the first three Wallace states:
 - “The first three of these passages [Mark 16:9-20; John 7:53-8:11; I John 5:7] have been considered inauthentic by most NT scholars—including most evangelical NT scholars—for well over a century. The presence or absence of these passages change no fundamental doctrine, nor core belief—despite the fact that there is much emotional baggage and certainly historical significance attached to them.” (Wallace, 44-45)
- Regarding the next three passages (Mark 1:41; Hebrews 2:9; and John 1:18) Dr. Wallace writes:
 - “In the next three passages, Ehrman adopts readings that most textual critics would consider spurious. I [Wallace] think his assessment is correct in one of them (Mark 1:41), possibly correct in one (Heb. 2:9), and almost surely incorrect in the last (John 1:18). Nevertheless, even if his text-critical decisions are correct in all three passages, the theological reasons he gives for the changes are probably overdone. . .” (Wallace, 45)
- So, of the seven passages cited by Dr. Ehrman in the conclusion to *Misquoting Jesus* to prove that textual variations do impact doctrine, Dr. Wallace agrees with five of them. Put another way, Dr. Wallace agrees with the text critical choices of Dr. Ehrman in five of the seven examples provided above. Yet, Dr. Wallace maintains that none of these textual variants impact the doctrinal content of the scriptures.
- Whether one agrees with Ehrman that these variants were created by proto-orthodox scribes seeking to strengthen their doctrine of Christ (Christology) is beside the point. How can the inclusion of these passages or lack thereof not alter the substantive doctrinal content of the Bible?

- Recall from Lesson 77 our discussion of Wallace’s third category of textual variants, “differences that affect the meaning of the text but are not viable.” (Wallace, 40) As an illustration of this type of variant Wallace stated:
 - “In I Thessalonians 2:9, one late medieval MS speaks of “the gospel of Christ” instead of “the gospel of God,” while almost all the other MSS have the latter. Here “the gospel of Christ” is a meaningful variant, but it is not viable because there is little chance that one medieval scribe somehow retained the wording of the original text while all other scribes for centuries before him missed it.” (Wallace, 42)
- In this Lesson we have seen that Wallace believes that Mark 16:9-20 are “inauthentic” and therefore have no place in the canon. Moreover, Wallace maintains that the exclusion of these twelve verses change “no fundamental doctrine, nor core belief.” (Wallace, 44-45) What is Wallace’s authority for calling these twelve verses “inauthentic?” The fact that they do not appear in the two so-called oldest and best manuscripts—Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus. So, Wallace is willing to call Mark 16:9-20 “inauthentic” based upon the testimony of only two Greek codices when every other witness that we have to the Greek New Testament contains these verses. In Appendix 168 of the *Companion Bible*, E.W. Bullinger offers a thorough argument for why the last twelve verses of Mark are “authentic.”
 - [Click here](#) to access Appendix 168
- The evidence for the “authenticity” of Mark 16:9-20 is overwhelming. Yet, Wallace is willing to call it “inauthentic” based upon the testimony of only two witnesses. This ought to call into question the criteria upon which text critics determine the “viability” of a particular textual variant. The canons of textual criticism are man-made, arbitrary, and out of step with how the Bible and common sense would teach one to think about the matter. Consider the following example from the pen of James R. White:
 - “If you put ten people in a room and asked them to copy the first five chapters of the Gospel of John, you would end up with ten “different” copies of John. In other words, no two handwritten copies would be absolutely identical to each other. Someone would skip a word that everyone else has. One person would misspell that one word that they can never get right. Someone would probably skip a line, or even a verse, especially if there were similar words at the beginning or end of the verse before and the verse after. So you would end up with a lot of variants. But would you not have ten copies of the same book? Yes, you would, and by comparing all ten copies you could rather easily reproduce the text of the original, because when one person makes a mistake, the other nine are not likely to do so at the very same spot.” (White, 38-39)
- While I do not believe in a reconstruction approach to the Biblical text, let us grant White his premise for the sake of discussion. Under normal circumstances how would White reconstruct the text based upon the example quoted above? Knowing that not everyone would make the same mistake in the same place, White believes that he could “reproduce the text of the original” by

reading the witness of the majority of the copies. Why then is he unwilling to do the same in real life with the actual Biblical text? Because the canons of textual criticism arbitrarily cause critics to function in ways that are abnormal and defy credulity.

- Having established that Mark 16:9-20 are viable and should be part of the New Testament text, let us turn our attention to the contention that no “essential doctrine of the Christian faith” is impacted by how one resolves this textual variant.
- Mark 16:8—if one removes verses 9-20 from the text, Mark’s gospels would end with the Apostles being afraid. This is a somewhat awkward ending.
- Mark 16:15-18—are the verses that give everyone trouble. All the mainline denominations consider verses 15 and 16 to be their commission and marching orders for today, even though they do not accurately teach verse 16. Baptists like verses 15 and 16 but drop out at verse 17. Meanwhile Pentecostals and Charismatics claim that tongues and exorcisms are for today. Regarding verse 18, the Baptists want no part of that verse; whereas Pentecostals pick and choose which parts of the verse are working today and which are not. Meanwhile, the Appalachian snake handlers and full gospel believers tempt fate routinely by claiming the entire passage is for us today as members of the body of Christ.
 - Matthew 28:19-20
 - Luke 24:47
- Would the inclusion of Mark 16:9-20 or lack thereof impact which denominational understanding of the so-called Great Commission is correct? If these verses are removed from the text what does one do when they find the Apostles functioning in these exact ways during the book of Acts. Questions raised by this passage highlight the connection between doctrine, theology, and actions.
- Mark 16:19—if one removes this verse from the book, the doctrine of the bodily ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ is expunged from Mark’s gospel. Textual Critics such as Wallace and White see this as no big deal since the bodily ascension is taught elsewhere in the Bible (Luke 24:51; Acts 1:9). Given the fact that the New Testament was originally written as twenty-seven separate books the question of whether or not this passage was originally included in Mark’s gospel would certainly have impact on the doctrinal understanding of the initial readers of the book.
- Luke 24:51—the phrase “and carried up into heaven” is missing from Codex Sinaiticus (4th Century), Codex Bezae Cantabrigensis (5th Century), most early Latin witnesses, and one version of the Syriac tradition. (Bible.org) Despite the fact that all other available witnesses to the text, some “2000 in all for this portion of Luke” contain the phrase; it was left out of the “1988 publication of the New American Standard Bible.” (Bible.org) According to Bible.org, the evidence needs to be weighed, not counted; when one does this, the evidence for omitting the phrase is “strong.” Yet, we are assured of the following by Bible.org:

- “Finally, regarding using this issue to deny that the Bible is the Word of God: That is a naive argument. The reason is simple: What is at stake in these viable textual variants is NEVER any fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith. The death and resurrection of the God-man, Jesus Christ, and the necessity of faith in him for salvation, are all clearly taught. What is at stake in the textual variants is our particular understanding of any given text, not our embracing of the essentials of the Christian faith.” (Bible.org)
- Reading statements such as this in the context of a discussion of the ascension of Christ makes one wonder what a “fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith” actually is according to modern textual critics. The historic creeds of the church, which I am using here to make a point, sure leave their readers with the impression that belief in the bodily ascension of Christ is a “fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith.” Consider the Apostles’ Creed and Nicaean Creed as prime examples:

Nicaean Creed (325 AD)	Apostles’ Creed (390 AD)
<p>I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible; And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made; who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; he suffered and was buried; and the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father; and he shall come again, with glory, to judge both the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end. And I believe in the Holy Ghost the Lord, and Giver of Live, who proceedeth from the Father [and the Son]; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; who spake by the Prophets. And I believe one holy Catholic and Apostolic Church; I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. AMEN.</p>	<p>I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth; And in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; the third day he rose from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic** church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.</p>

- Both creeds contain clear statements on the ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ. Yet, once again, we are assured by textual critics that no textual variant impacts any “fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith.”
- According to Codex Sinaiticus, one of the so-called oldest and best MSS, the ascension of Christ has no place in the four Gospels. This famous Codex has extracted the ascension from Mark 16 and Luke 24 and we are supposed to believe that no essential doctrine is impacted by textual variants.
- Textual Critics such as James R. White will argue that the doctrine of the bodily ascension of Jesus Christ is not impacted by leaving out Mark 16:19 or the phrase in question in Luke 24:51 because the doctrine is still affirmed in Acts 1. White supports this reasoning by arguing for something he calls “*parallel influence*.” White uses another discrepancy between the King James and Modern Versions found in Matthew 1:25 to argue for why the phenomena of *parallel influence* does not impact doctrine.

KJB	NASB	ESV	NIV
And knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name JESUS.	but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus.	but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.	But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

- In Matthew 1:25 the King James explicitly calls Jesus Christ the “firstborn” son of Mary; thereby protecting the doctrine of the virgin birth of Christ. I think we can agree that most Christians would consider the doctrine of the virgin birth to be a “fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith.” In this case the NASB and KJB readings constitute different ways of saying the same thing despite the NASB’s reading not possessing the word “firstborn.” The NASB still makes it clear that Mary was a virgin when she gave birth to Jesus which would have made Jesus her “firstborn” son. Meanwhile the ESV (Literal Translation) and NIV (Dynamic Translation) readings leave open the possibility that Jesus was Mary’s son sired by a different man other than Joseph. Moreover, the ESV and NIV readings allow for the possibility that Mary could have had other children fathered by other men before the birth of Jesus. Two of these readings protect the doctrine of the virgin birth and two of them weaken it.
- Regarding the doctrinal problem created by the NIV’s reading, White states the following:
 - “. . . Matthew 1:25 is often cited by critics of modern translations as an attempt to deny the virgin birth of Christ. Yet if a modern translation were to do this, why not remove the *parallel occurrence* of the term at Luke 2:7 where all modern translations contain the disputed term? In reality, we have here another example of *parallel influence* that caused a scribe, undoubtedly zealous for orthodox doctrine, to insert the term “firstborn” here so as to protect a sacred truth and bring this passage in line with Luke’s account. Modern

translations, far from seeking to denigrate such divine truths are simply seeking to give us what was written by the original authors.” (White, 159)

- Note how much James R. White sounds like Bart D. Ehrman in this passage. White alleges that scribes “zealous for orthodox doctrine” inserted the term “firstborn” into the text in order “to protect a sacred truth” i.e., strengthen their Christology or doctrine of Christ. These noteworthy observations aside, White is saying that the doctrine of the virgin birth is not negatively impacted by the Critical Text and translations thereof by dropping the phrase “firstborn” since the phrase is found elsewhere in Luke 2:7. This is the same type of argument advanced by textual critics for why extracting Mark 16:19 (9-20) and even a key phrase from Luke 24:51 does not impact the doctrine of the bodily ascension of Christ. Rest easy, we are assured; the ascension is still in Acts 1.
- The line of thinking advanced by White and his fellow text critics with respect to Mark 16:19 and Luke 24:51 is scripturally flawed for the following reasons:
 - As noted above, the New Testament was originally written as twenty-seven separate books. The question of whether Mark 16:9-20 was originally included in Mark’s gospel would certainly have impacted the doctrinal understanding of the initial readers of the book. Likewise, for the phrase “and carried up into heaven” in Luke 24:51. Given that Luke is the first part of a two-part treatise addressed to Theophilus with a space of time separating the composition and reception of the second volume, was it critical that Luke’s gospel contain the ascension of Christ? Or was it non-essential and superfluous to Luke’s gospel, thereby constituting doctrine that Theophilus could wait to believe or did not need to believe until he received the book of Acts?
 - If one says that it does not matter whether the ascension is found in Mark and Luke because it is elsewhere affirmatively asserted (Acts 1), what does that do to one’s stance for Plenary Verbal Inspiration or the idea that every word was inspired by God. It seems to me that this argument avoids the core question of whether the ascension belongs in Mark and Luke.
 - II Corinthians 13:1—it is a general principle of scripture that God establishes His word in the mouth of two or three witnesses. In the absence of the original autographs How do White and Wallace know that God did not want the ascension in Mark 16, Luke 24, and Acts 1?
 - I Corinthians 2:13—the Holy Ghost teaches by comparing spiritual things with spiritual things or scripture with scripture. Removing key passages on a given topic or doctrine would hamper the Spirit’s ability to teach that doctrine.
- There are logical problems with this line of argumentation as well:

- First, without access to the original autographs, how does White or anyone else for that matter know what was written by the original authors? In order to make this statement White must presuppose that his textual position is correct. Moreover, he assumes that every variant of this type is the result of overzealous scribes seeking to harmonize texts based upon parallel influence when a scribe could have just as easily deleted a word or phrase either by accident or because they disagreed with it. Once again, this is an explanation of no practical consequence and an assumption on White's part because, in the absence of the original manuscripts, he cannot prove it.
- Second, what does one do about doctrines that are taught in only one primary passage and are not repeated elsewhere? The whole idea of "rightly dividing the word of truth" in II Timothy 2:15 stands out as a possible prime example. The NASB's "accurately handling," the ESV's "rightly handling," or the NIV's "correctly handles" do not accurately convey the force of the Greek word *orthotomeō* which means to cut straight and divide. The KJB's rendering "rightly dividing the word of truth" accurately conveys the sense and the force of the word *orthotomeō*. In short, the principles of textual criticism advanced by White and others such as *repetition*, *harmonization*, and *parallel influence*; cannot secure and/or assure the doctrinal content of truth conveyed via singular passages. Therefore, they are of questionable validity.
- I believe that the notion that no textual variant impacts any "fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith" to be false and absurd. Regardless of what White and Wallace say in the present, history provides ample examples of those who's faith was altered drastically by the issue of textual variants. We will look at an example of this in the next Lesson.

Works Cited

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