

Sunday, March 24, 2019—Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*
 Lesson 82 Normal Transmission: From Paul to Tertullian, 200 AD

Introduction

- Last week in [Lesson 81](#) we laid out three Biblical principles for identifying the preserved text in history.
 - *Multiplicity of Copies* (See Lessons [48](#), [49](#), [50](#), 51, [52](#), [53](#), and [81](#))
 - *Available/Accessible* (See Lessons [55](#) and [81](#))
 - *In Use* (See Lessons [55](#) and [81](#))
- When these three Biblical principles are applied to the historical and textual FACTS, they point toward the *Textus Receptus (TR)*, the text of the Protestant Reformation, as being the printed form of the Preserved Text in Greek. The *TR* is supported by the vast majority of extant Greek manuscripts (*multiplicity of copies*) as found in the Byzantine Text-type. Moreover, it represents a text that was clearly available, accessible, and in use by Bible believing people throughout the history of the dispensation of grace. Its availability, accessibility, and use are seen not only in the MSS of the Byzantine majority, but also in the early versions, patristic quotations, and Lectionaries; all of which support the readings found in the *TR* (see the table on page 6 for statistical data on the Lectionaries).
- In stark contrast, the Critical Text supporting Modern Versions fails on all three counts to pass the tests of scripture: 1) it has few manuscript witnesses that substantively disagree with each other; 2) its principle manuscripts were not accessible or available to believers throughout the dispensation of grace; and 3) given their lack of availability, they certainly were not copied and/or used by Bible believing people during the church age.
- In this Lesson we want to use Wilbur N. Pickering’s argument for “normal transmission” to frame a discussion of the text’s transmission through time. Please note that for the purposes of this Lesson, I am utilizing two different editions of Pickering’s *The Identity of the New Testament Text*.

Normal Transmission: From Paul to Tertullian, 200 AD

- In *A Defense of the Majority Text*, Dallas Theological Seminary professor Zane C. Hodges laid out his case for the “normal transmission” of the scriptures. Hodges’ work was later quoted by Dr. Wilburn N. Pickering in *The Identity of the New Testament Text* in a chapter titled “The History of the Text.” In the following citation, Hodges explains why under “normal circumstances” the oldest form of a text is most likely to have been preserved in “a plurality or majority” of texts as opposed to a “small minority:”
 - “Under normal circumstances the older a text is than its rivals, the greater are its chances to survive in a plurality or a majority of the text extant at any subsequent period. But the oldest text of all is the autograph. Thus, it ought to be taken for granted that, barring

some radical dislocation in the history of transmission, a majority of texts will be far more likely to represent correctly the character of the original than a small minority of texts. This is especially true when the ratio is an overwhelming 8:2. Under any reasonably normal transmissional conditions, it would be . . . quite impossible for a later text-form to secure so one-sided a preponderance of extant witnesses.” (Hodges quoted in Pickering, 89)

- According to Hodges, the text that is supported by the “majority” of readings is more likely to represent the oldest form of the text under “normal transmissional conditions.” These statements off the pen of Hodges correspond to our major conclusions from Lesson 81.
 - The scriptural model of preservation requires both the existence of the Byzantine Text and the Critical Text. Put another way, if the Greek manuscript evidence was 100% Byzantine, that would be an unbelievable state of affairs, given the clear Satanic policy of attacking the word of God (Genesis 3:1-6, II Corinthians 2:17, II Thessalonians 2:2). Prior to even looking at the evidence, a Bible believer would expect to find: 1) a dominant pure text that has been widely copied and extensively utilized by the believing church throughout time (which is an accurate description of the Byzantine Text), and 2) a minority text for which there is clear evidence of its existence but which has been rejected by the believing church and not consistently utilized throughout time (which is an accurate description of the Critical Text). Thus, the state of the evidence turns out to be exactly what one would expect to find based upon what scripture teaches as to God's manner of preservation of His word and Satan's attempts to corrupt it.
- The question we need to consider is, was the transmission of the New Testament text “normal?”

1st Century Identification and Reception of the New Testament Text

- According to Dr. Pickering, “naturalistic critics like to assume that the New Testament writings were not recognized as Scripture when they first appeared and thus through the consequent carelessness in transcription the text was confused, and the original wording “lost” . . . at the very start.” (Pickering, 99-100) On this point, Ernest Colwell stated the following in his 1952 publication *What is the Best New Testament?*
 - “Most of the manuals and handbooks now in print (including mine!) will tell you that these variations were the fruit of careless treatment which was possible because the books of the New Testament had not yet attained a strong position as “Bible.”” (quoted in Pickering, 100)
- The position described by Pickering and enunciated by Colwell is untenable for a Bible believer. Recall that in [Lesson 20](#) we studied the “new testament writer’s attitude toward the written word.” In doing so, we demonstrated from scripture that the New Testament writers were keenly aware that what they were writing was scripture.
 - I Corinthians 14:37—Paul was aware that his writings possessed divine authority.

- II Corinthians 13:3—the words of Jesus Christ were coming from Paul’s mouth as well as his pen, and Paul was conscious of that fact.
 - I Thessalonians 4:15— the expression “by the word of the Lord” denotes a special and specific prophetic announcement, and it is used repeatedly in the Old Testament to describe God’s word coming unto someone and then going out through them (Genesis 15:1; II Samuel 7:4; I Kings 12:22). One can run other references in the Old Testament and see the significance of what Paul is doing in I Thessalonians 4:15 when he says, “For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord.” He is saying, “What I am writing to you people here is God Almighty’s communication to you.” Paul is conscious of what he is doing. Moreover, I Thessalonians is probably the first epistle Paul wrote (if not his first, then it is his second). Paul’s very first epistles bear the highest claim to inspiration of any of them. He makes the highest claim to inspiration right at the beginning of his writing ministry.
 - II Thessalonians 3:6, 14—Paul is commanding them in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ to do some things; and he says that if the man does not “obey our word by this epistle” (i.e., the epistle that he is in the process of writing), that they are to have no company with him.
 - I Timothy 5:18—Paul quoted Deuteronomy 25:4, the words of Moses, and then he quoted Luke 10:7, the words of Christ and he called them both scripture (*graphē*). Paul did not make any distinction between them. Paul considered Luke 10 to be just as authoritative as Deuteronomy 25. That is important for you to realize, so you understand that Paul and the other New Testament writers consider their writings as equally inspired as the rest of the word of God.
 - I Timothy 6:3— I Timothy 6 is a passage about Paul’s authority as the apostle of the Gentiles, but it also shows you his estimation of scripture. In Chapter 6 Paul is talking about what he had written in the book of I Timothy. It is obvious that Christ’s words were coming from Paul’s mouth, and he was conscious of that fact.
 - II Peter 3:1-2—Peter says, “I want you to remember what the Old Testament prophets said as well as what I and the other apostles have commanded.” He does not consider that there was any gap between them, but total equality. In other words, Peter considered what he was saying as equal with the Old Testament.
 - II Peter 3:15-16—Peter calls everything Paul wrote in “all his epistles” scripture or *graphē*. When the New Testament writers look out and see the other authors writing books, they say, “Hey, that is scripture too.” They recognized what was going on. They knew and recognized each other’s books. There is a process whereby they were able to authoritatively identify which books were authoritative and authentic.
- These passages make it clear then that New Testament writers were aware that their writings were inspired and possessed divine authority. Not only were the New Testament writers aware of the inspired nature of the writings, but the original recipients and readers were aware that the words of the apostles possessed divine authority.

- I Thessalonians 2:13—the Thessalonians “received the word of God” that they heard from Paul “not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God.” In other words, they were able to distinguish between the words of men and the words of God. This means that saved members of the body of Christ were able to know and understand what was and was not God’s word during the first century when the New Testament was still being written.
- Consequently, the believing viewpoint maintains that from its infancy in the 1st century, the body of Christ was able to distinguish the word of God from the words of men. Words that were “received” as the word of God were revered and placed in a different category and on a higher plain than the mere words of men. Therefore, when the body of Christ began the process of transmitting the New Testament documents in the 1st century they would have done so from the predisposition of faith, believing that what they were copying were the words of God.

1st Century Transcription: No Need for Textual Criticism

- Regarding the situation in the 1st century, Pickering states the following:
 - “Not only did the apostles themselves declare the New Testament writings to be Scripture, which would elicit reverence and care in their treatment, they expressly warned the believers to be on their guard against false teachers—see Acts 20:27-32, Galatians 1:6-12; 2 Timothy 3:1-4:4, 2 Peter 2:1-2; 1 John 2:18-19, 2 John 7-11, Jude 3-4, 16-19. Peter’s statement concerning the “twisting” [“wresting”] Paul’s words were receiving (2 Peter 3:16) suggest there was awareness and concern as to the text and the way it was being handled. I recognize that the Apostles were focusing on the interpretation rather than the copying of the text, and yet, since any alteration of the text may result in a different interpretation, we may reasonably infer that their concern for the truth would have included the faithful transmission of the text. Indeed, we could scarcely ask for a clearer expression of this concern than that given in Revelation 22:18-19; since it is the glorified Christ who is speaking, would not any true follower of His pay careful attention? [“Faced with such a sanction, would any true believer dare to tamper with the text, or transcribe it carelessly?” Quoted from the 1980 edition of *The Identity of the New Testament Text*, 107.]” (Pickering, 99)
- Therefore, as Pickering points out, the widely asserted notion that “the early Christians were either unconcerned or unable to watch over the purity of the text” (Pickering, 98) is not only false, it is unscriptural given that they were charged with the task of copying and transmitting the text. As a mixed company, comprised of both Jews and Gentiles, the body of Christ would have possessed an awareness of how the ancient Israelites approached the preservation and transmission of the Old Testament. Given that the body of Christ revered the New Testament as inspired and of equal authority with the Old, it is reasonable to assume that they would have exacted an equivalent level of care when transcribing the New Testament documents.
- The reality of the situation in the 1st century is as follows: The body of Christ knew what the *pure text* was on account of *corporate exposure*, *corporate reception*, and the ministry of the New

Testament prophets. Therefore, the earliest copyists did not need to be textual critics because they already knew what the text was.

- “Why should modern critics assume that the early Christians, in particular the spiritual leaders among them, were inferior in integrity and intelligence? A Father’s quoting from memory or tailoring a passage to suit his purpose in sermon or letter by no means implies that he would take similar liberties when transcribing a book or corpus. Ordinary honesty would require him to produce a faithful copy. Are we to assume that everyone who made copies of New Testament books in those early years was a knave or a fool? . . . **Starting out with what they knew to be the pure text, the earlier Fathers did not need to be textual critics. They had only to be reasonably honest and careful. But is there not good reason to believe that they would be especially watchful and careful?**” (Pickering, 98-99)

Testimony of the Church Fathers

- Evidence furnished by the Church Fathers provides helpful clues as to the state of affairs in the early days of the text’s transmission. Polycarp makes clear that there was a strong feeling about the integrity of the scriptures when he stated, “whoever perverts the sayings of the Lord . . . that one is the firstborn of Satan.” (quoted in Pickering, 99) Likewise, Dionysius Bishop of Corinth (168-176) complained that the Holy Scriptures along with his own letters had been tampered with. In his *Against Heretics IV*, Irenaeus said that the doctrine of the apostles had been handed down without any forging of the Scriptures, allowing neither addition nor curtailment. Regarding the New Testament scriptures Tertullian wrote, “I hold sure title-deeds from the original owners themselves. . . I am the heir of the apostles. Just as they carefully prepared their will and testament, and committed it to a trust. . . even so I hold it.” (quoted in Pickering, 100)
- Following what appears to have been an ancient practice of leaving instructions for future transcribers of a work, Irenaeus stated the following in the conclusion of his *On the Ogdoad*:
 - “I adjure you who shall copy out this book, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by his glorious advent when he comes to judge the living and the dead, that you compare what you transcribe, and correct it carefully against this manuscript from which you copy; and also that you transcribe this adjuration and insert it in the copy.” (quoted in Pickering, 100)
- With this in mind, Pickering asks the following relevant question, “If Irenaeus took such extreme precautions for the accurate transmission of his own work, how much more would he be concerned for the accurate copying of the Word of God?” (100) The evidence suggests that Irenaeus was willing to defend the text down to the reading of a single letter. Regarding whether 666 or 616 is the proper reading in Revelation 13:18, a difference in Greek of only one letter, Irenaeus defended the traditional reading of 666 arguing that it is found “in all the most approved and ancient copies.” Furthermore, he invokes Revelation 22:18-19 as a warning that for those who made the change (from 666 to 616) “there shall be no light punishment upon him who either adds or subtracts anything from Scripture.” (Pickering, 100-101)

- Pickering connects the dots for us between the Apostle John, Polycarp, and Irenaeus when it comes to the Biblical text:
 - “Considering Polycarp’s intimacy with John, his personal copy of Revelation would most probably have been taken from the Autograph. And considering Irenaeus’ veneration for Polycarp, his personal copy of Revelation was probably taken from Polycarp’s. Although Irenaeus evidently was no longer able to refer to the Autograph (not ninety years after it was written!) he was clearly in a position to identify a faithful copy and declare with certainty the original reading. . .” (Pickering, 101)
- Around the year 200 AD Tertullian stated the following in his *Prescription Against Heretics*:
 - “. . . run over the apostolic churches, in which the very thrones of the apostles are still pre-eminent in their places, in which their own authentic writings [*authenticae*] are read, uttering the voice and representing the face of each of them severally. Achaia is very near you, (in which) you find Corinth. Since you are not far from Macedonia, you have Philippi; (and there to) you have the Thessalonians. Since you are able to cross to Asia, you get Ephesus. Since, moreover, you are close upon Italy, you have Rome, from which there comes even into our own hands the very authority (of the apostles themselves).” (Tertullian, *Persecutions Against Heretics* [Cp. XXXVI](#))
- Regarding this citation from the pen of Tertullian, Dr. Pickering states the following in *The Identity of the New Testament Text IV*:
 - “Some have thought that Tertullian was claiming that Paul’s Autographs were still being read in his day (208), but at the very least he must mean they were using faithful copies. Was anything else to be expected? For example, when the Ephesian Christians saw the Autograph of Paul’s letter to them getting tattered, would they not carefully execute an identical copy for their continued use? Would they let the Autograph perish without making such a copy? (There must have been a constant stream of people coming either to make copies of their letter or to verify the correct reading.) I believe we are obligated to conclude that in the year 200 the Ephesian Church was still in a position to attest the original wording of her letter. . .” (Pickering, 101)
- Combining all the relevant information from the Church Fathers, Pickering makes the following summative statement regarding the state of the text in the year 200 AD.
 - “Both Justin Martyr and Irenaeus claimed that the Church was spread throughout the whole earth, in their day—remember that Irenaeus, in 177 became bishop of Lyons, in Gaul [A region comprising modern-day France, parts of Belgium, western Germany, and northern Italy.], and he was not the first bishop in that area. Coupling this information with Justin’s statement that the memoirs of the apostles were read each Sunday in the assemblies, it became clear that there must have been thousands of copies of the New Testament writings in use by 200 AD. Each assembly would need at least one copy to read from, and there must have been private copies among those who could afford them.” (Pickering, 101)

- The information presented in this Lesson provides objective Biblical and historical evidence in support of the following propositions.
 - The Apostles knew they were writing inspired scripture and informed their readers to “receive” their writings as the word of God.
 - The recipients and readers of the New Testament documents “received” them as “the word of God.”
 - When the body of Christ began the process of transmitting the New Testament documents in the 1st century, they did so from the predisposition of faith, believing that what they were copying were the words of God.
 - Starting out with what they knew to be the *pure text*, the body of Christ did not need to be textual critics. They had only to be reasonably honest and careful in the copying process.
 - By the year 200 AD, thousands of copies of the New Testament documents were circulating throughout the Roman Empire.
 - In AD 200, the exact original wording of several New Testament books could still be verified and attested.
 - The *pure text* was never “lost.”

Works Cited

Pickering, Wilbur N. *The Identity of the New Testament Text*. Nashville, TN, 1980.

Pickering, Wilbur N. *The Identity of the New Testament Text, IV*. Brazil, 2014.

Tertullian, *Persecutions Against Heretics* [Cp. XXXVI](#).