

Sunday, April 7, 2019—Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*
 Lesson 83 Normal Transmission: Four Controlling Factors

- In [Lesson 82](#) we began looking at Dr. Wilbur N. Pickering’s argument for “normal transmission” as set forth in *The Identity of the New Testament Text IV*. In doing so, we observed the following points:
 - The Apostles knew they were writing inspired scripture and informed their readers to “receive” their writings as the word of God (I Cor. 14:37; II Cor. 13:3; Gal. 1:11-12; I Thess. 4:15; II Thess. 3:6, 14; I Tim. 5:18, 6:3; II Pet. 3:1-2, 15-16).
 - The recipients and readers of the New Testament documents “received” them as “the word of God” (I Thess. 2:13)
 - 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.”
- In this Lesson we want to investigate the factors that would have facilitated the faithful transmission of the New Testament text. Dr. Wilbur N. Pickering argues in *The Identity of the New Testament Text IV* that there are four controlling factors: 1) access to the Autographs, 2) proficiency in the source language, 3) the strength of the church, and 4) an appropriate attitude toward the text.

Access to the Autographs

- Recall from Lesson 82 that Tertullian stated the following in his *Prescription Against Heretics* around the year 200 AD:
 - “. . . 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 too) 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](#))

- Whether Tertullian was speaking about the autographs themselves or copies of the autographs is debated by theologians and textual critics. At a minimum Dr. Pickering believes the following about this citation from the pen of Tertullian:
 - “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)
- Regarding “access to the autographs” as a criterion for who was best qualified to transmit the text, Pickering states the following:
 - “This criterion probably applied for well less than a hundred years (the Autographs were presumably worn to a frazzle in that space of time) but it’s highly significant to a proper understanding of the history of the transmission of the Text. Already by the year 100 there must have many copies of the various books (some more than others) while it was certainly still possible to check a copy against the original, or a guaranteed copy, should a question arise. The point is that there was a swelling stream of faithfully executed copies emanating from the holders of the Autographs to the rest of the Christian world. In those early years the producers of copies would know that the true wording could be verified, which would discourage them from taking liberties with the text.” (Pickering, 102)
- As we have seen in previous studies, this does not mean that the word of God was not being intentionally corrupted in the 1st century. We know from the scriptures that it was (II Corinthians 2:17; II Thessalonians 2:2). Rather, it means that faithful copyists could easily check their work against either the autographs themselves or certified/accurate copies of the autographs. This does mean, however, that geography played a factor in the story of transmission.
 - “. . . distance would presumably be a factor—for someone in North Africa to consult the Autograph of Ephesians would be an expensive proposition, in both time and money. I believe we may reasonably conclude that in general the quality of copies would be highest in the area surrounding the Autograph and would gradually deteriorate as the distance increases. Important geographical barriers would accentuate the tendency.” (Pickering, 102)
- In other words, the geographic area surrounding where the autographs were sent would possess the highest amount of accurate and reliable copies of the New Testament documents. Why? Because copyist in these areas could easily verify the accuracy of their transcriptions.

- In terms of geography, the area surrounding the Aegean Sea would have been in the best position to faithfully transmit the text.
 - “. . . Speaking in terms of regions, Asia Minor may be safely said to have had twelve (John, Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, I & II Timothy, Philemon, I Peter, I, II, & III John, and Revelation), Greece may be safely said to have six (I & II Corinthians, Philippians, I & II Thessalonians, and Titus in Crete), Rome may be safely said to have had two (Mark and Romans)—as to the rest, Luke, Acts and II Peter were probably held by either Asia Minor or Rome; Matthew and James by either Asia Minor or Palestine; Hebrews by Rome or Palestine; while it is hard to state even a probability for Jude it was quite possibly held by Asia Minor. Taking Asia Minor and Greece together, the Aegean area held the autographs for a least eighteen (two-thirds of the total) and possibly as many as twenty-four of the twenty-seven New Testament books; Rome held at least two possibly up to seven; Palestine may have held up to three (but in A.D. 70 they would have been sent away for safe keeping, quite possibly to Antioch); Alexandria (Egypt) held **none**. The Aegean region clearly had the best start, and Alexandria the worst—the text in Egypt could only be second hand, at best.” (Pickering, 102-103)
- Pickering connects these facts regarding the geographic distribution of the autographic text with the citation from the Tertullian quote above:
 - “On the face of it, we may reasonably assume that in the earliest period of the transmission of the N.T. Text the most reliable copies would be circulating in the region that held the Autographs. Recalling the discussion of Tertullian above, I believe we may reasonably extend this conclusion to A.D. 200 and beyond. So, in the year 200 someone looking for the best text of the N.T. would presumably go the Aegean area; certainly not to Egypt.” (Pickering, 103)

Proficiency in the Source Language

- On this point I have areas of agreement and disagreement with Dr. Pickering. On the matter of disagreement, Dr. Pickering sees precise transmission as only having occurred through Greek MS copies of the New Testament. In fact, Pickering does not think that a “perfect” translation is possible. Consequently, Dr. Pickering sees ancient versions such as the Syriac, Latin, and Coptic as being useful when considering major variants but not the precise wording of the text. Only Greek, the source language, is capable of this level of “precision,” according to Pickering.
 - “As a linguist (PhD) and one who has dabbled in the Bible translation process for some years, I affirm that a “perfect” translation is impossible. (Indeed, a tolerably reasonable approximation is often difficult enough to achieve—the semantic areas of the words simply do not match, or only in part.) It follows that any divine solicitude for the **precise form of the NT Text** would have to be mediated through the language of the Autographs—Greek. Evidently ancient Versions (Syriac, Latin, Coptic) may cast a clear vote with reference to major variants, but **precision is possible only in Greek** (in the case of the N.T.). That by way of background, but our main concern here is with the copyists.” (Pickering, 103)

- As good as Dr. Pickering’s materials are regarding the historical transmission of the text, he has not wiggled free from the false assumption of *verbatim identity* of wording. When Pickering speaks of “the precise form of the NT Text” or states that “precision is possible only in Greek” what standard is he applying? None other than the standard of *verbatim identity*. If one drops this unscriptural standard, it is completely reasonable to speak of a “perfect translation” as one 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*.
- Moreover, it is scriptural to view translations of the *pure Greek text* into the languages of the nations as part of the preservation/transmission process.
 - Romans 16:25-26—God revealed the mystery to Paul so that it could be “made known to all nations for the obedience of faith.” The only way that was going to be possible is if the Greek text was translated into the languages of the people. As long as a translation accurately conveys the substantive doctrinal content of the inspired and/or preserved text, it can accurately be referred to as perfect. Scripturally, perfection does not equal *Xeroxed identity*.
 - Ephesians 3:4—in order to understand “the mystery of Christ” all one needs to be able to do is read the scriptures. If the mystery was given “to all nations for the obedience of faith” it must be available for all nations to know.
- When viewed from this perspective, early versions clearly demonstrate which form of the text was available and in use by the body of Christ (See [Lesson 81](#)). It was not the Greek MSS of the Alexandrian minority, but the multiplicity of copies as found in the Byzantine majority. Therefore, the early versions offer clear historical and textual support that the body of Christ revered and utilized the text of the Aegean rim as found in the Byzantine Text-type.
- Regarding the transmission of the Greek text, a point upon which we agree, Dr. Pickering states:
 - “For a faithful transmission to occur the copyists had to be proficient in Greek, and over the long haul. So where was Greek predominant? Evidently in Greece and Asia Minor; Greek is the mother tongue of Greece to this day (having changed considerably during the intervening centuries, as any living language must). The dominance of Greek in the Aegean area was guaranteed by the Byzantine Empire for many centuries; in fact, until the invention of printing. Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453; the Gutenberg Bible (Latin) was printed just three years later, while the first printed Greek New Testament appeared in 1516.” (Pickering, 104)
- Put another way, it makes sense that you would want the people who know the most about Greek to be primarily responsible for the transmission of the Greek text? As a point of contrast, Dr. Pickering asks, “how about Egypt?” In other words, how did the use of the Greek language fair in North Africa? Even Critical Text advocate Bruce Metzger maintains that the use of Greek was already declining in North Africa at the beginning of the Christian era. In his *Early Versions*, Metzger stated the following regarding the Greek speaking population in Egypt: it “was only a

fraction in comparison with the number of native inhabitants who used only the Egyptian languages.” (Metzger, 104) Kurt and Barbra Aland concur with Metzger that by the year 200 AD the tide had already begun to turn against the use of Greek in areas that spoke Latin, Syriac, and Coptic [Egypt], and, fifty years later, the changeover to the local languages was well advanced. (Aland, 52-53) Therefore, the evidence suggests that the so-called Alexandrian Text was transmitted by people who did not even use Greek. Perhaps this might account for the terrible transcriptional quality of a codex such as Codex Sinaiticus.

- In summation of this point, Pickering writes the following:
 - “Again the Aegean Area is far and away the best qualified to transmit the Text with confidence and integrity. Note that even if Egypt had started out with a good text, already by the end of the 2nd century its competence to transmit the text was steadily deteriorating. In fact the early papyri (they come from Egypt) are demonstrably inferior in quality, taken individually, as well as exhibiting rather different types of text (they disagree among themselves).” (Pickering, 104)

Strength of the Church

- Dr. Pickering identifies two reasons why the strength of the church is important in the transmission of the text:
 - “First, the law of supply and demand operates in the Church as well as elsewhere. Where there are many congregations and believers there will be an increased demand for copies of Scriptures. Second, a strong, well established church will normally have a confident, experienced leadership—just the sort that would take an interest in the quality of their Scriptures and also be able to do something about it. So in what areas was the early Church strongest?” (Pickering, 105)
- Once again, the evidence for the strongest form of the church points to Asia Minor and those areas of Europe around the Aegean Sea.
 - “The main line of advance seems to have been north to Asia Minor and west into Europe. . . the center of gravity for the Church seems to have shifted from Palestine to Asia Minor by the end of the first century.” (Pickering, 105)
- Acts 13—consider that Paul was sent into Asia by the church in Antioch, not Jerusalem. From there Paul’s ministry pressed further West into Europe culminating in his stay at Rome in Acts 28 and following.
 - Romans 15:24, 28—Paul desired to push the gospel as far West as Spain.
- Even Critical Text advocates Kurt and Barbara Aland cannot deny that Asia Minor constituted the “heartland of the church” even as late as 325 AD.
 - “The overall impression is that the concentration of Christianity was in the East. Churches became fewer in number as we go westward. Large areas of the West were still

untouched by Christianity. Even around A.D. 325 the scene was still largely unchanged. Asia Minor continued to be the heartland of the Church.” (Aland, 53)

- So, who was in the best position to identify and transmit the *pure text* of the New Testament? It would have been those Bible believing assemblies of Asia Minor and Eastern Europe around the Aegean Sea to whom the majority of the New Testament documents were originally sent.
- In contrast, Colin H. Roberts, author of *Manuscript, Society, and Belief in Early Christian Egypt*, a scholarly treatment of Christian literary papyri in the first three centuries of the church, concludes that the Alexandrian Church was weak and insignificant when compared to the Greek Church during the 2nd century. (Roberts, 42-43, 54-58) Likewise, Kurt and Barbra Aland state the following regarding the state of the church in Egypt:
 - “Egypt was distinguished from other provinces of the Church, so far as we can judge, by the early dominance of Gnosticism.” (Aland, 59)
- In another work, published in the *Trinity Journal* titled “The Text of the Church”, Kurt Aland informed his readers that “at the close of the 2nd century” the Egyptian church was “dominantly gnostic.” (quoted in Pickering, 105) Later in the same work Aland states:
 - “The copies existing in the gnostic communities could not be used, because they were under suspicion of being corrupt.” (quoted in Pickering, 105)
- Dr. Pickering offers the following statement in summation:
 - “Now this is all very instructive—what Aland is telling us, in other words, that up to A.D. 200 the textual tradition in Egypt could not be trusted.” (Pickering, 105)
- Interestingly enough, fellow text critic Bruce M. Metzger agrees with Aland’s assessment of the textual situation in Egypt before the year 200 AD. In his *Early Versions* Metzger writes:
 - “Among the Christian documents which during the second century either originated in Egypt or circulated there among both the orthodox and the Gnostics are numerous apocryphal gospels, acts, epistles, and apocalypse. . . There are also fragments of exegetical and dogmatic works composed by Alexandrian Christians, chiefly Gnostics, during the second century. . . In fact, to judge by the comments made by Clement of Alexandria, almost every deviant Christian sect was represented in Egypt during the second century; Clement mentions the Valentinians, the Basilidians, the Marcionites, the Peratae, the Encratites, the Docetists, the Marcionites, the Cainites, the Ophites, the Simonians, and the Eutychites. What portion of Christians in Egypt during the second century were orthodox is not known.” (Metzger, 101)
- Pickering closes this section of his book by pointing out the duplicity of Aland and Metzger’s reasoning:
 - “But we need to pause to reflect on the implication of Aland’s statements. He was a champion of the Egyptian (“Alexandrian”) text-type, and yet he himself informs us that

up to A.D. 200 the textual tradition in Egypt could not be trusted and that by 200 the use of the Greek had virtually died out there. So on what basis can he argue that the Egyptian text subsequently became the best? Aland also states that in the 2nd century, 3rd century, and into the 4th century Asia Minor continued to be “the heartland of the Church.” This means that the superior qualifications of the Aegean area to protect, transmit, and attest the N.T. Text carry over into the 4th century! It happens that Hort, Metzger, and Aland (along with many others) have linked the “Byzantine” text-type to Lucian of Antioch, who died in 311. Now really, would a text produced by a leader in “the heartland of the church” be better than whatever evolved in Egypt? Of course, I ask the above question to point out their inconsistency. The “Byzantine” text-type existed long before Lucian.” (Pickering, 106)

- Romans 3:1-2—seems to offer Biblical support to the notion that the churches of Aegean region were strong precisely because two thirds of the autographic text of the New Testament had been addressed to assemblies and individuals in that region.

Attitude Toward the Text

- One’s attitude toward the text is Pickering’s fourth “controlling factor” when it comes to transmission.
 - “Where careful work is required, the attitude of those to whom the task is entrusted is of the essence. Are they aware? Do they agree? If they do not understand the nature of the task, the quality will probably go down. If they understand but do not agree, they might even resort to sabotage—a damaging eventuality.” (Pickering, 106)
- We have already seen that the New Testament documents were received as the word of God by the church during the 1st century when they were being written.
 - “We have seen that the faithful recognized the authority of the N.T. writings from the start, so the making of copies would have begun at once. The authors clearly intended their writings to be circulated, and the quality of their writings was so obvious that the word would get around and each assembly would want a copy.” (Pickering, 106)
- Regarding the attitude of the early copyists, Dr. Pickering states the following:
 - “Being followers of Christ, and believing that they were dealing with Scripture, to a basic honesty would be added reverence in their handling of the Text, from the start. And to these would be added vigilance, since the Apostles had repeatedly and emphatically warned them against false teachers. As the years went by, assuming that the faithful were persons of at least average integrity and intelligence, they would produce careful copies of the manuscripts they had received from the previous generation, persons who they trusted, being assured that they were transmitting the true text. There would be accidental copying mistakes in their work, but no deliberate changes. It is important to note that the earliest Christians did not need to be textual critics. Starting out with what they knew to be the pure text, they had only to be reasonably honest and careful.” (Pickering, 107)

- Another factor to consider when discussing the believing attitude toward the text is hermeneutics or the science of Biblical interpretation. Very early in church history two very different hermeneutical approaches to the Biblical text developed. The so-called “school of Antioch” developed in the 2nd century and stressed/insisted upon the literal interpretation of scripture. In contrast, Philo of Alexandria established the allegorical approach to the Old Testament before the first Christians arrived in Alexandria, Egypt. Consequently, when Origen later organized the famous “school of Alexandria” it was characterized by an emphasis upon the allegorical method of interpreting scripture. Regarding how these divergent attitudes towards Biblical interpretation would have impacted the transmission of the text, Pickering writes:
 - “Antiochians began insisting upon the literal interpretation of Scripture. The point is that a literalist is obliged to be concerned about the precise wording of text since his interpretation or exegesis hinges upon it. It is reasonable to assume that this “literalist” mentality would have influenced the churches of Asia Minor and Greece and encouraged them in the careful and faithful transmission of the pure text that they had received. For example, the 1,000 MSS of the Syriac Peshitta are unparalleled for their consistency. . . Since Philo of Alexandria was at the height of his influence when the first Christians arrived there, it may be that his allegorical interpretation of the O.T. began to rub off on the young church already in the first century. Since an allegorist is going to impose his own ideas on the text anyway, he would presumably have fewer inhibitions about altering it—precise wording would not be a priority.” (Pickering, 107-108)

Conclusion

- In answer to the question of who was best qualified to transmit the Biblical text, the four controlling factors of 1) access to the autographs, 2) proficiency in the source language, 3) strength of the church, and 4) attitude toward the text point in the direction of the Aegean rim, the territory that later comprised the Byzantine Empire.
 - “The Aegean area was the best qualified to protect, transmit, and attest the true text of the N.T. writings. This was true in the 2nd century; it was true in the 3rd century; it continued to be true in the 4th century.” (Pickering 108)
- In our next Lesson we will begin looking at the characteristics of “normal transmission.”

Works Cited

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