

Sunday, May 3, 2026—Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*  
Lesson 285 Understanding the Bibliology of the Reformers: The Inspired Copies

### **Introduction**

- One of the most common assumptions in modern evangelicalism is that biblical authority and infallibility reside only in the original autographs which no longer exist. This lesson challenges whether that assumption accurately reflects Reformation and confessional Protestant theology.
- The Protestant Reformation was not merely a doctrinal recovery but a textual and ecclesiastical crisis. Questions about authority, scripture, and the word of God stood at the center of the conflict between Protestants and Rome.
- The Reformers preached, translated, confessed, and defended scripture without possession of the original autographs, yet they did so with absolute confidence that the church truly possessed the Word of God.
- The great Protestant confessions were written in a polemical context, responding directly to Roman Catholic claims that the biblical text had been corrupted and that the Church alone could adjudicate doctrinal authority.
- For the purposes of this lesson, we will note what the Reformers believed regarding the Bible:
  - Inspiration
  - Preservation
  - Translation
  - Inerrancy/Infallibility
  - Sola Scriptura

### **Protestant Bibliology During the Reformation**

- Bibliology is a word used by theologians to describe one's view of the scripture.
- [\*The Westminster Confession of Faith\*](#) (WCF) drafted in 1646 is viewed by many as the standard bearer for the Protestant view of scripture. It was influential in the drafting of the following creeds:
  - 1658—[\*The Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order\*](#) (Reformed)
  - 1689—[\*The London Baptist Confession\*](#) (Baptistic)

- 1742—[\*The Philadelphia Baptist Confession\*](#) (Baptistic)

### *Inspiration*

- The WCF states the following regarding the doctrine of inspiration.
  - Chapter I Article II—Under the name of Holy Scripture, or the Word of God written, are now contained all the books of the Old and New Testament, which are these . . . All which are given by inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life.
  - Chapter I Article III—The books commonly called Apocrypha, not being of divine inspiration, are not part of the canon of the Scripture, and therefore are of no authority in the Church of God, nor to be any otherwise approved, or made use of, than other human writings.
  - Chapter I Article VIII—The Old Testament in Hebrew (which was the native language of the people of God of old), and the New Testament in Greek (which, at the time of the writing of it, was most generally known to the nations), being immediately inspired by God,
- There is absolutely no language in the WCF limiting inspiration to the original *autographs* alone.

### *Preservation*

- The framers of the WCF also believed in the doctrine of preservation.
  - Chapter I Article VIII—The Old Testament in Hebrew (which was the native language of the people of God of old), and the New Testament in Greek (which, at the time of the writing of it, was most generally known to the nations), being immediately inspired by God, and, **by His singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentic**; so as, in all controversies of religion, the Church is finally to appeal unto them.
- The WCF demonstrates the historic Protestant belief in the notion of preservation or the idea that God kept his word “pure in all ages.” This belief was held across denominational traditions (Reformed and Baptistic) as well as geographical boundaries (Old and New World).

### *Translation*

- All four *Confessions* hold that the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament were “inspired by God” and “kept pure in all ages.” Moreover, the saints responsible for these *Confessions* assert the need for these pure Hebrew and Greek words to be translated in the “vulgar language of every nation unto which they come.”

- Chapter I Article VIII— The Old Testament in Hebrew (which was the native language of the people of God of old), and the New Testament in Greek (which, at the time of the writing of it, was most generally known to the nations), being immediately inspired by God, and, by His singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentical; so as, in all controversies of religion, the Church is finally to appeal unto them. **But, because these original tongues are not known to all the people of God, who have right unto, and interest in the Scriptures, and are commanded, in the fear of God, to read and search them, therefore they are to be translated in to the vulgar language of every nation unto which they come, that, the Word of God dwelling plentifully in all,** they may worship Him in an acceptable manner; and, through patience and comfort of the Scriptures, may have hope.
- This is a strong appeal for the accurate and proper translation of the pure Hebrew and Greek words into the vernacular languages of all peoples. It is also important to note that the drafters of these *Confessions* were ascribing these statements to the Masoretic Hebrew Text and the Greek *Textus Receptus*, the only original language texts the Reformers had available to them. It was the act of translating the *Textus Receptus* into the vernacular languages of Europe that drove the Reformation and touched off the greatest era of Christian mission work the world has ever seen. These are historical facts that cannot be disputed.

#### *Inerrancy/Infallibility*

- The Westminster divines believed in the infallibility of the scriptures despite not having access to the original *autographs*.
  - Chapter I Article V—We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the Church to an high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture. And the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, **and the entire perfection thereof**, are arguments whereby it does abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God: yet notwithstanding, **our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof**, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.
- My investigation into the writings of Luther and Calvin revealed that these men believed the scriptures were inerrant simply because they were the word of God. The belief that the scriptures were infallible was based upon “the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts,” according to the WCF. There was no formal theological doctrine of inerrancy, and it was certainly not limited to the original *autographs* only.

### *Sola Scriptura*

- It is clear from the final two Articles of Chapter I that the WCF maintained the Protestant conviction that scripture alone is the final authority in the matter of faith and practice.
  - Chapter I Article IX—**The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself:** and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.
  - Chapter I Article X—The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, **can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.**
- For the Reformers, *textual criticism* began with the following presuppositions:
  - The scriptures were the inspired word of God and of Divine origin.
  - What God gave by inspiration He also preserved and “kept pure in all ages.”
  - God’s word was available to be translated into the vernacular languages of the nations.
  - When it was translated it remained the word of God and retained its divine authority.

### **Protestant Dogmaticians & The Sacred *Apographa***

- In Chapter 2 of his book *The Ecclesiastical Text: Text Criticism, Biblical Authority & the Popular Mind* Dr. Theodore P. Letis calls the generation of Reformers that drafted the Confessions noted above the “Protestant Dogmaticians.” He defines them as follows:
  - “By Protestant dogmaticians I mean those much-maligned heirs of Luther and Calvin from the post-Reformation era of the seventeenth century.” (Letis, 30)
- Regarding this generation of Reformers, Letis stated the following:
  - “They have been discounted since the Enlightenment for two reasons: (1) they resorted to system building beyond what is considered the dynamic genius of the sixteenth century Reformers. This, in turn, prompted the formulation of creeds and confessions, considered by most today to reflect a propensity for over-definition. (2) They resorted to the Aristotelian method of the medieval schoolmen in their post-Tridentine [relating to the Council of Trent] battles with Rome.

What we sometimes fail to realize is their era demanded such response. Theirs, after all, was a different age requiring a different response to the freshly-articulated Romanism of Trent, rather than that of the medieval schoolmen with whom Erasmus, Luther and Calvin had to contend. It was the special burden of the seventeenth-century Protestants to make certain the Reformation experiment of the sixteenth century continued to thrive within the new context of a now militant counter-Reformation age.

Most of the Protestant theology written at this time, along with the confessions and creeds, was prefigured by the systematic challenges presented to them by counter-Reformation theologians fighting for the very life's breath of the Latin Church.” (Letis, 30-31)

- The Protestant thinkers of this era did not ground their Bibliology in the original *autographs* or *autographa* but in the *apographa* or faithful copies of first originals.
  - “By sacred *apographa* I mean the final referent of Biblical authority in the opinion of the Protestant dogmaticians—both Lutheran and Reformed. These are the faithful copies of the originally inspired *autographa*. The latter word is derived from the Greek noun *autographos*, original manuscripts written with one’s own hand; The former word is derived from the Greek noun *apographō* meaning transcripts, copies from an original manuscript. By *sacred apographa* I mean those copies the Protestant dogmaticians regarded as faithful and authoritative copies of the original as opposed to corrupted or inauthentic copies.” (Letis, 31-32)
- Theodore Letis explains that historic Protestant theologians distinguished between the *autographa* (the original, inspired manuscripts of Scripture) and the *apographa* (faithful copies made from those originals). While the *autographa* were inspired, Protestants did not locate biblical authority only in textually lost originals. Instead, they regarded the “sacred *apographa*”—reliable and authentic copies preserved within the church—as the final and functional referent of biblical authority. These faithful copies were considered fully authoritative Scripture, even while corrupted or inauthentic manuscripts were rejected. Letis’s point is that classical Protestantism affirmed both inspiration and preservation, grounding sola Scriptura in the Scripture actually possessed and used by the church.
- In the next section of Chapter 2, Letis quotes examples from different Lutheran Dogmaticians regarding their views of the *apographa* i.e., copies. Time and space will allow for the following select citations:
  - C. Gerhard (1582-1637)—“Divine Providence did not permit those books to be corrupted and perverted; otherwise, the foundation of the church would totter and fall. . . . Were one to grant that something in Holy Scripture was changed, most of its genuine authority would disappear. On the other hand, however, Christ declares, Matt. 5:18 “Until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.” Also Luke 16:17: It is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for

one dot of the Law to become void.” . . . Just as Paul testifies that “the Jews are entrusted with the oracles of God,” namely, those described in the books of the Old Testament, Rom. 3.2; so too, we can say in regard to the primitive Christian Church that it is entrusted with the oracles of God described in the books of the New Testament. You see, it has received the *autographs* from the very evangelists and apostles and has faithfully preserved them in the patriarchal churches so that they could correct the copies [*apographa*] and other versions according to the tenor of the autographs (Gerhard:505; 502).” (quoted in Letis, 37)

- “We say that this Greek codex which we are now reading in the church is the very same one which the Greek Church used at the time of Jerome and all the way back to the days of the apostles; it is true, genuine, faithful and contaminated by no fault of falsehood, as a continual reading of all Greek fathers shows very clearly.” (Gerhard:553)” (quoted in Letis, 37)
- D. Quenstedt (1617-1688)— “Our argument runs as follows: every holy Scripture which existed at the time of Paul was θεόπνευστος [*theopneustos*] (2 Tim. 3:16) and authentic. Not the autographic (for they had perished long before), but the *apographic* writings existed at the time of Paul. Therefore the apographic Scripture also is θεόπνευστος and authentic. . . . For although inspiration and divine authority inhered originally in the autographa, these attributes belong to the apographa by virtue of their derivation [radicaliter], since they were faithfully transcribed from them so that not only the sense but also the words were precisely the same (Preus:48).” (quoted in Letis, 38)
- “G. W. Bromiley agrees with Preus and me: “Quenstedt, however, took the even more difficult position that the *apographs* are fully inspired because the words as well as the content of the *autographs* are substantially retained in them” (Bromiley 1978:320).” (quoted in Letis, 38)
- E. Hollaz (1648-1713)— “Hollaz “seems to go further. He asserts that the very words as well as the content of the *autographic* texts are today in the *apographa*. A good copy of an inspired writing is inspired like the original writing” (Preus:48).” (quoted in Letis, 39)
- After these citations and more, Dr Letis concludes the following regarding the Lutheran position on the *autographa*.
  - “Preus notes that the decisive issue for Lutherans in this debate with Rome never centered on the nature of the theoretical *autographic* text;,\* this would grant precious ground to the Roman theologians:

Most Catholic teachers would have granted that the ancient Greek and Hebrew *autographa* were authentic. They argued that the MSS which we have today, however, cannot be regarded as authentic because, after many years of copying, they have become corrupt and impure. This thought naturally led back to a

discussion regarding the integrity of the contemporary text . . . Bellarmine contended that the Vulgate could not err because it enjoyed the approbation of the Church. (Preus:139).

One of the major criticisms directed at Erasmus by Roman Catholic dogmaticians was that he was returning to the corrupted Bible of the schismatic Greek Church. Rome's theologians believed, based on the unerring authority of the Papal Church, that the *Vulgata Latina* alone preserved the original content of the autographic texts. In response to this clear-cut position of Rome, Quenstedt offered the definitive Protestant response, aptly capturing both the Lutheran and Reformed sentiment in the seventeenth century:

We believe, as is our duty, that the providential care of God has always watched over the original and primitive texts of the canonical Scriptures in such a way that we can be certain that the sacred codices which we now have in our hands are those which existed at the time of Jerome and Augustine, nay at the time of Christ Himself and his apostles [emphasis mine] (Preus:48).

To this, Preus adds after surveying eighteen of the most important Lutheran dogmaticians of the seventeenth century, “This was the Lutheran position in a nutshell.” (Letis, 39-40)

- After the section on the Lutheran Dogmaticians, Letis pivots to discussing the Reformed Dogmaticians in the next section of Chapter 2.
  - John Owen (1616-1683)—“ The publishing of Brian Walton’s *London Polyglot* (1657) provided the occasion for one of the most systematic defenses of the *apographa* by a Reformed dogmatician. John Owen, the leading Puritan theologian at the time of the publishing of the Polyglot, was distressed at Walton’s naked display of every variant to the N.T. text—sometimes with a significant degree of redundancy—known at that time. Owen bemoaned Walton’s list of textual variants that took up as many pages in Walton’s Polyglot as did his entire N.T. text. To Owen, this constituted both a crisis and a scandal: a crisis because this left the impression that the very wording of the N.T. was greatly in doubt; a scandal because Walton had so indiscriminately published this for the world to see. Owen responded to Walton in his essay, “*Of the Integrity and Purity of the Hebrew and Greek Text of the Scriptures*,” 1659. In this work, Owen argued the Polyglot gave material support to the Roman Catholic position by leaving the impression,

The original [language] copies of the Old and New Testament are so corrupted (“*ex oro tuo, serve nequam*”) that they are not a certain standard and measure of all doctrines, or the touchstone of all translations. . . . Of all the inventions of Satan to draw off the minds of men from the Word of God, this *decrying the authority of the originals* [the *apographa*] seems to me the most pernicious (Owen 1850—53:285).

Owen clearly understood the implications for Protestant authority in this threat from the Polyglot:

Besides the injury done hereby to the providence of God towards His Church, and care of His Word, it will not be found so easy a matter, upon a supposition of such corruption in the originals as is pleaded for, to evince unquestionably that the whole saving doctrine itself, at first given out from God, continues entire and incorrupt [sic] (Owen:302).” (Letis, 41-42)

“ . . . the purity of the present original copies of the Scripture, or rather copies [apographal] in the original languages, which the Church of God doth now and hath for many ages enjoyed as her chiefest treasure (Owen:353).” (quoted in Letis, 43)

- Letis also cites a passage from the Reformed theologian Francis Turretin’s *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (1688) on “The Purity of the Sources”. Turretin was a Professor of Theology at the University of Geneva. (Letis, 44) Turretin’s famous 10<sup>th</sup> question of his “Second Topic: The Holy Scriptures” reads as follows, “Have the original texts of the Old and New Testaments come down to us pure and uncorrupted? We affirm against the papists.” (Turretin, 106) The following was his answer in part.
  - “I. This question lies between us and the papists who speak against the purity of the sources for the purpose of establishing more easily the authority of their Vulgate version and leading us away to the tribunal of the church.
  - II. By the original texts, we do not mean the autographs written by the hand of Moses, of the prophets and of the apostles, which certainly do not now exist. We mean their apographs which are so called because they set forth to us the word of God in the very words of those who wrote under the immediate inspiration of the Holy Spirit.
  - III. The question is not are the sources so pure that no fault has crept into the many sacred manuscripts, either through the waste of time, the carelessness of copyists or the malice of the Jews or of heretics? For this is acknowledged on both sides and the various readings which Beza and Robert Stephanus have carefully observed in the Greek (and the Jews in the Hebrew) clearly prove it. Rather the question is have the original texts (or the Hebrew and Greek manuscripts) been so corrupted either by copyists through carelessness (or by the Jews and heretics through malice) that they can no longer be regarded as the judge of controversies and the rule to which all the versions must be applied? The papists affirm, we deny it.” (Turretin, 106)
- Francis Turretin argued that the debate with Roman Catholics concerns whether the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures can still function as the authoritative standard for doctrine. He clarifies that by “original texts” Protestants do not mean the lost *autographs* written by the biblical authors, but the *apographs*—the existing Hebrew and Greek manuscripts that faithfully preserve the inspired words. Turretin freely admits that minor copying errors and textual variations exist, a fact

acknowledged by both sides. However, he denies that these variations amount to corruption so serious that Scripture can no longer judge doctrinal disputes. Against the Catholic claim that such corruption necessitates reliance on the Church and the Latin Vulgate, Turretin insists that the biblical texts remain sufficiently pure and authoritative to serve as the final rule of faith and the standard by which all translations are evaluated.

- Regarding the Lutheran and Reformed Dogmaticians, Dr. Letis stated the following:
  - “While the Lutherans never codified this position on the sacred apographa in a confessional statement, the Reformed did. Thirteen years before Owen published his response to Walton, the Westminster Confession was drafted (1646) affirming,

The Old Testament in Hebrew . . . and New Testament in Greek . . . being immediately inspired by God, and by his singular care and providence kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentical. Chapter one, Section eight (Leith 1973:196).

Note that by using the word authentical, the Westminster divines were sanctioning the Greek Church's recension of the New Testament and the common Jewish, Masoretic text in response to Trent which referred to the *Vulgata Latina* as authentica.

Later, in 1675, Turretin of Geneva, Lucas Gernler of Basel and John Henry Heidegger of Zurich, composed the Formula Consensus Helvetica, which stated:

“God, the supreme Judge, not only took care to have His Word, which is the “power of God unto Salvation to everyone that believeth” (Rom. 1:16), committed to writing by Moses, the prophets, and the apostles, but has also watched and cherished it with paternal care ever since it was written up to the present time, so that it could not be corrupted by craft of Satan or fraud of man. Therefore the church justly ascribes it to His singular grace and goodness that she has, and will have to the end of the world, a “sure word of prophecy” and “holy Scriptures” (2Tim. 3:15), from which, though heaven and earth perish, “one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass” (Matt. 5:18). Chapter one (Leith:309—10)” (Letis, 44-45)

- In his 1971 doctoral thesis titled *The Doctrine of Scripture in Seventeenth Century Reformed Theology*, John Robinson was forced to acknowledge the following regarding the Reformed view of scripture.
  - “Reformed theologians were not arguing for the obvious authenticity of the no longer extant autographs. Instead, they were claiming authenticity for the received texts which they viewed as equivalent to the original manuscripts, and which they referred to as the “authentic sources,” the “first editions,” the “Greek and Hebrew originals,” the “original texts,” etc. The authenticity of Greek and Hebrew “sources” was held to be absolute both in form and content. . . . In summary, the Reformed theologians held that only the

received Hebrew text of the Old Testament and the Greek text of the New Testament were authentic, authoritative editions of the Scripture (98; 101-102).” (quoted in Letis, 47)

- In the Conclusion to Chapter 2, Dr. Letis stated the following:
  - “There was a general consensus among the Protestant dogmaticians of the seventeenth century that the apographa were inspired and authoritative. The seventeenth-century Protestant dogmaticians located all the attributes of the sacred text in the extant MS tradition passed on by the Greek Orthodox Church and the Jewish synagogue and which prevailed during the Renaissance. This became the localized sacred text for Protestants. In the words of Richard Muller, the leading authority on this subject:

By “original and authentic” text, the Protestant orthodox do not mean the *autographa* which no one can possess but the *apographa* in the original tongue which are the source of all versions. . . . The orthodox discussion of *autographa* and *apographa* was designed, therefore, to point toward a continuity of text-tradition between the original authors and the present day texts (Muller 1993:433—434).

Moreover, this was an explicit response both to Tridentine Rome and its claims for the *Vulgata Latina* as well as a response to the early emergence of Biblical criticism amongst Protestants both on the continent as well as in Britain. This position was dogmatically maintained in the isogogics of the day as well as being codified in certain of the Reformed confessions. More-over, it was also exegetically grounded within the text of Scripture itself. The extant, ecclesiastical recensions of the original language texts, the *apographa*, were, for the Protestant orthodox communities, the sacred text.” (Letis, 56-57)

- The Protestant Reformers and the seventeenth-century Protestant dogmaticians did not restrict biblical inspiration and authority to the original *autographs*, which they acknowledged no longer existed. Rather, they affirmed that God’s inspired Word was faithfully preserved in the Hebrew and Greek *apographs*—the received copies of Scripture kept pure by divine providence. These *apographs* were regarded as authentic, authoritative, and sufficient to function as the church’s final rule in matters of faith and controversy. While recognizing minor textual variations, the Reformers denied that such differences compromised the integrity or authority of Scripture. This conviction undergirded *sola Scriptura*, justified the translation of Scripture into the vernacular, and grounded Protestant confidence that the church truly possesses the Word of God in written form.

## Conclusion

- The Protestant Reformers and their seventeenth-century heirs never taught that the Word of God was confined to the original *autographs* of Scripture. While they fully acknowledged that the

*autographs* no longer existed, they consistently affirmed that God’s Word continued authoritatively in the *apographs*, the faithful copies preserved and received by the church. This conviction was inseparable from their robust doctrine of preservation, namely that what God gave by inspiration He also preserved by His singular care and providence, keeping the Scriptures “pure in all ages.” Although the Reformers recognized the presence of minor scribal variations, they denied that these amounted to a corruption that undermined Scripture’s identity, authority, or sufficiency. As a result, the church was never left without the Word of God, nor dependent upon a lost or merely theoretical text. Instead, *sola Scriptura* rested on the concrete reality of a preserved, accessible, and authoritative Scripture—one that could be preached, translated, confessed, and trusted as the final rule of faith and practice in every generation.

- The modern standard evangelical view places ultimate inspiration and authority in the original *autographs*, which no longer exist and must be reconstructed through textual criticism. As a result, Scripture’s final form is often treated as theoretical and provisional, with authority resting in scholarly reconstructions rather than in a concrete, possessed text.
- In contrast, the classical Protestant (Reformation and post-Reformation) view locates authority in the preserved *apographs*—the Hebrew and Greek texts actually received and used by the church. While acknowledging textual variants, the Reformers denied that such differences destroyed the purity, authenticity, or sufficiency of Scripture as the rule of faith. Textual criticism, therefore, was ministerial not magisterial: it explained variants but did not determine whether Scripture was authoritative. This view provided epistemological stability, affirming that God’s Word was not lost, inaccessible, or dependent on ongoing reconstruction. Because the *apographs* were authoritative, faithful translations were genuinely the Word of God, supporting preaching, discipleship, and global missions.
- The great Protestant confessions ascribed infallible truth, divine authority, and final doctrinal authority to the Hebrew Old Testament and Greek New Testament as they were actually preserved and used by the church, not to lost original *autographs*. While the confessions did not name specific editions (Turretin named Beza & Stephanus), the only texts in existence and ecclesiastical use at the time were the Masoretic Hebrew Text and the *Textus Receptus* Greek New Testament. By confessing that these Scriptures were “kept pure in all ages” and were therefore “authentic,” the Protestant confessions affirmed that the church possessed an authoritative and trustworthy text sufficient to function as the final rule of faith and practice. In this way, infallibility was not theoretical or tied to non-existent originals, but was grounded in the concrete, received Scriptures given by God’s providence to His people.
- In summary, the key difference is one of location of authority:
  - Evangelical model → authority in lost originals.
  - Classical Protestant model → authority in providentially preserved copies of Scripture.

- The Protestant Reformers held that while infallibility formally belongs to the preserved Hebrew and Greek Scriptures, it extends to translations insofar as they faithfully agree with the received text. Translations were not viewed as mere human approximations, but as the true Word of God conveyed in another language, suitable for preaching, worship, and doctrine. Although translations were always subject to correction by the original-language text, the Reformers nevertheless treated faithful vernacular versions as authoritative and binding, because they accurately communicated the inspired and preserved Scriptures God had given to His church.

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[Westminster Confession](#)