

Retrospect and Prospect

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Century divisions, such as the nineteenth century and the twentieth century, provide convenient groupings for survey purposes. As we approach the twenty-first century, many are endeavoring to anticipate the next century, often assuming further outworking of what they have comprehended to be the trends of the last two centuries. Most of us can recall less than half a century. Much of our attitude regarding the past is molded by the media.¹ Our evaluation of future trends will have value only as we properly employ principles of the past and truths of the Word of God.

In fields of Biblical scholarship, the nineteenth century was a period of great advancement and at the same time a period of radical departure. Development in both directions was not the result of improved human intellect, however, but of God's providential provision. Information available for study was four-fold greater

¹Media surveys of the decades of the twentieth century of characterize the culture by music/dance (the roaring twenties) or by economic factors (great depression, expanding economy). Religious features are seldom considered important.

during the nineteenth century for fields of Bible archaeology, Bible history, comparative linguistics, etc., as well as for studies of biology.

Available increased information led to differing conclusions. In biology, some saw developing species whereas others saw diversity within set species. The facts were not different; how the facts were handled brought differing explanations. By the end of the nineteenth century, much of scholarly work could be grouped as either by Bible-believers or by Bible-deniers.

The situation is really very much the same at the close of the twentieth century, but perhaps not so clear cut. Our purpose in these leadership sessions was to review the available facts and to re-evaluate the way we work with those facts. Each one of us needs to ask afresh whether our supreme desire is to know the truth, or perhaps only to further our own position.

The amount of previously unknown information available to Bible scholars newly come to light during the twentieth century is not nearly so great as that of the nineteenth century. In fact, of significant material, it is hard for most of us to name more than the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls in the present century. Our comprehension of koine Greek,² for instance, has not greatly advanced beyond the works of Robertson and Moulton and Milligan,³ both of which were based on nineteenth and early twentieth century discoveries.

If we judge the amount of new factual material to have been super-abundant in the nineteenth century and minimal in the twentieth century, what can we guess for the next century? God might choose providentially to enlarge once again the quantity of factual evidences.

²"Surprisingly little progress has been made in Greek grammar during the past few decades, partly reflecting declining standards in classical education, partly reflecting interest diverted elsewhere. Of course, there are many exceptional scholars who contribute substantially to the discipline; but much work needs to be done." D.A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 88-89.

³A.T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934); James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950).

Or, He may judge (unless it is His timetable for the rapture) that men need to give greater attention to the mass of material already at hand. Humanly speaking, the tool of computer retrieval may be of special significance.⁴

What we must concern ourselves with, however, is not what God might choose to bring to light but how we do what we do with the information now available to us. As Bible scholars, we need to consider wisely the presuppositions and prejudices which mold our work. As preliminary to such a task, the first aspect to develop is in regard to definition of terms. Many theological disagreements are nothing more than semantic differences; it is thus well for us to try to agree as to what we are talking about. Concentration for this series of conference papers was on texts and versions. So, what is it that we are discussing?

Distinctions of Terms

Some of the terms we use are commonly understood; others are technical and exact. We should endeavor to use labels in meaningful ways. Here is a brief identification of some words you will be hearing. Encourage yourself to hear them correctly and distinguish them properly.

Autographa

The word "autograph" identifies that which is "self-written." Bible scholars use the word to speak of the first, original human writing of books of the Bible, whether by the prophet himself or by another as he dictated. There was thus, so far as we know, only one autograph writing of each of the inspired sixty-six books.⁵ No autograph documents are extant today. Our goal is to ascertain from

⁴Gordon H. Lovik, "The IBM PC XT and the NT Join Hands," *Calvary Update* 8 (Spring 1984), 1-2, an early evaluation of the value of GRAMCORD.

⁵Jeremiah wrote a portion of his book twice (Jer 36:23, 27-28, 32).

all the information available to us, as closely as we possibly can, exactly what was written in the autographa.

To appreciate the importance of the autographa and the task of ascertaining the original text, an illustration developed by E.J. Young seems especially profitable.

Suppose that a schoolteacher writes a letter to the President of the United States. To her great joy she receives a personal reply. It is a treasure which she must share with her pupils, and so she dictates the letter to them. They are in the early days of their schooling, and spelling is not yet one of their strong points. In his copy of the letter Johnny has misspelled a few words. Mary has forgotten to cross her t's and to dot her I's. Billy has written one or two words twice, and Peter has omitted a word now and then. Nevertheless, despite all these flaws about thirty copies of the President's letter have been made. Unfortunately, the teacher misplaces the original and cannot find it. To her great sorrow it is gone. She does not have the copy which came directly from the President's pen; she must be content with those that children have made. Will anyone deny that she has the words of the President? Does she not have his message, in just those words in which he wrote it to her? True enough, there are some minor mistakes in the letters, but the teacher may engage in the science of textual criticism and correct them. She may correct the misspelled words, and she may write in those words which have been omitted and cross out those which are superfluous. Without any serious difficulty she may indeed restore the original.

It should be clear that errors are bound to appear in almost anything that is copied. If the reader will copy out five pages of his English Bible he will doubtless make the discovery, on reading over his work, that he has made some mistakes. This does not mean that there are mistakes in the Bible but merely that there are some mistakes of copying (copyist's errors, as they are called) in what the reader has written out.

Such is the case with the manuscripts of the Bible which are extant.⁶

Copy

We use the word "copy" of every reproduction by any means. There was before long a first copy (by hand) of the autographa, and then a copy of the copy, and a copy of that copy, etc. The word "copy" does not certify correctness. Even the latest state of the art photo reproduction, because of a speck of dust, may put a period where none is desired. Our doctrine of infallible inspiration pertains to the autographa of the sixty-six books of the Bible, but not to any of the copies.

Since humans are human, we can comprehend that even the first one to copy the book of Isaiah may have introduced some slight variation of the text. Hebrew copyists were aware of human fallibility, and so they developed careful proofreading procedures. In the Dead Sea Scroll of Isaiah, for instance, the copyist himself corrected forty-nine errors of various kinds; several places were corrected by one with a different handwriting, and even a mistake by the second proofer was corrected by one with a third distinct style!⁷

Since the invention of the printing press, publishers indicate whether the book is a first printing, a reprint, or a revision. Sometimes just resetting the type produces new errors. The various editions of the King James English translation, for instance, must be properly identified, particularly where there was an updating of spelling.⁸

⁶E. J. Young, *Thy Word is Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 57; cf. also 87-88.

⁷ Millar Burrows, *The Dead Sea Scrolls of St. Mark's Monastery*, vol 1 (New Haven: The American Schools of Oriental Research, 1950), xv.

⁸ Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *From God to Us* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), 240.

Translation

God's inscripturated special revelation was written in the language of the day, whether Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek. The word "translation" pertains to conveying the message by means of a language other than the original. When Moses and Aaron conveyed God's message to Pharaoh (Exod 7:2), translation was involved. When Ezra read aloud from the Hebrew to a people more familiar with Aramaic, he clarified the meaning (Neh 8:8) by means of translation.

The earliest major translation of the Old Testament was into Greek, two centuries or more prior to Christ.⁹ Translations into Aramaic and Syriac also aid understanding of the text.¹⁰ Translation, for our purposes, has to do with language expression other than that employed in the autographa.

Version

The term "version" has to do with translations which involved many persons, often as an authorized committee, rather than just one or a few in the production of the translation. The work of Jerome to produce the Latin Vulgate was thus a result of the scholarship and viewpoint of just one man. Work on many English translations has been done by a number of qualified scholars, often to represent a wide scope of viewpoints (which may be good or bad, or both).

A translation by a single seminary student may be more accurate than that found in any version. The test of worthiness is not the translator's age or level of accomplishment, but the correspondence of the message conveyed to the truth originally inscripturated. No translation or version is inspired. No translation

⁹Ernst Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1957), 34-36.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 56-61.

or version is a full and exact communication of the original, and yet most translations convey the eternal truth of God's revelation.

Paraphrase

A paraphrase is a miniature commentary. Every translation from one language to another is to a greater or lesser degree an interpretation. A paraphrase is a deliberate interpretative emphasis, intended to clarify a certain nuance not easily conveyed. Paraphrases, thus, tend to be much more subjective than translations. That is not to say that they are not correct or beneficial. They merely need to be recognized for what they are and to be evaluated accordingly.

Inspiration

The term inspiration identifies that work of the Holy Spirit in which He superintended the reception and communication of the divine message to mankind so that the product is verbally and plenary both inerrant and authoritative. Fundamentalists have stood firm on this significant doctrine. Through the second half of the twentieth century, new evangelicals have hedged and even retreated. The observation of long ago still is valid: There is only one doctrine of inspiration set forth in the Word of God; all other explanations are of men, not of God.¹¹

Only the first writing by the prophet himself or by his scribe was inspired in the sense of being fully Holy Spirit controlled and thus totally without error of any kind. The quality of being God-breathed revelation truth (the quality which is the result of the previous act) pertains to all copies and translations. As one who greatly exalts the King James version well stated: when we claim the King James version to be the inspired Word of God, we do not use the

¹¹"Consulting the consciousness of the Scriptures themselves in this matter, we soon learn that it is either 'plenary inspiration' or nothing at all." Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1948), 22.

word "inspired" in the same sense as when we speak of the autographa as inspired by God.¹²

This distinction is important. Theologically, the words "inspiration" and "inspired" are used both of the process and of the product. The process involved guidance and enablement by the Holy Spirit through the acquisition phase: Reception of special revelation from God, personal observation and recall, and what we refer to as research. The process guided the human writing down of the autographa. The autographa was the product of the out-breathing activity of God. The product was inspired, as to its origin, and it is inspired, referring to its unique quality as the only out-breathed inscripturated book.¹³ No sermon, lecture, or writing today bears that quality. We do not produce any inspired communications, in the theological sense. A sermon, lecture, or article can be "inspiring" in the colloquial use, but that is quite different. When we preach, we endeavor to include much of the Word of God, for that is God's inspired message; that is what God the Holy Spirit uses for His effective ministries of conviction and edification.

Not all that is infallibly recorded in the Bible came by fresh, new, original, direct, special revelation from God. For instance, the disciples or Dr. Luke recorded much that they had personally observed and experienced. The Holy Spirit earlier had stimulated their observation and later guided their recall. Some of the written or oral sources used by those who penned the sixty-six inspired books may have contained errors. We have no documents which can be

¹²"I do not believe the King James translators were inspired in the same sense that the writers of the original autographs were inspired, but I believe they were led by the Holy Spirit as multitudes of godly people have been before and after the KJV. I do not believe that the italicized words were inspired. In fact, the translators assured us of that when they were put in italics. I do not believe that the translation is inspired, but I do believe that every word, with exception of the italicized words has been preserved for us in the King James Bible, that they constitute the inspired, inerrant preserved Word of God." Allen P. Dickerson, "They Call It the King James Controversy," *Maranatha Baptist Watchman* 43 (January 1996): 2.

¹³Warren Vanhetloo, "Indications of Verbal Inspiration," *Calvary Baptist Theological Journal* 5 (Spring 1989): 83-84.

identified as such previous sources, and so no comparisons can be made. We can confidently accept that God guided the human writers so that no errors from human sources were included in His Word.

A prophet may have been aware only of the immediate situation; God used local needs to make vivid His eternal truth. Our goal in interpretation is to ascertain the truth conveyed by God in the clothing of the local setting. We endeavor to learn what God desired man to know, rather than how much men comprehended at the time.

Preservation

Fundamentalists approaching the turn of the century now are engaged in working out implications of that which we know about God's process of overseeing the copies and translations of His Word down through the centuries. There is no doctrine regarding divine preservation of the Bible in the Bible nor in standard theological texts. Creeds and confessions of the past give no hint of serious concern or of settled agreement among any group of believers. This search for a proper conception of God's providential guidance was the focal point of presentations at this conference this year.

We ought not to expect a clear resolution of the problem in any one presentation. We cannot hope for a single, brief, all-inclusive, satisfactory statement to be the outcome of three days together here. Perhaps in twenty or fifty years, a clear statement will be obvious and used by all. We who are in the midst of formulation often fail to take in fully the whole picture and to balance properly the various features which in due time will become clear and obvious. Such a process has always characterized doctrinal development. So, we should consider next, some of the guidelines we need to observe as we work toward proper comprehension of God's pattern of preservation of the truth of His Word. What we do will have a bearing on what will take place in the twenty-first century.

Pertinent Advice

For this process of contemporary clarification, we should keep in mind a few obvious principles to guide what we investigate and how we conduct ourselves during the investigation.

Fact or Opinion

Perhaps the most important distinction (as in all academic endeavors) is to treat facts as factual, and interpretations or opinions as such. The letters which appear on a page of an ancient text will appear the same to saved and unsaved, to learned scholars and to high school students. They are there, but some others may interpret them in ways quite different from our viewpoint.

Our task is first to search out pertinent facts. Photographic reproductions of the Dead Sea Scrolls provide textual evidence from plus or minus 175 B.C. The Stuttgart edition of the Hebrew Bible provides known variations. The number of extant Greek copies of the New Testament is almost beyond human computation. We have abundant factual records to evaluate, even though we do not have copies of the autographa. The way we deal with facts may be effective or ineffective, pertinent or inconsequential, right or wrong; facts do not change.

Opinions may be of varying importance, but they are still opinions. The opinion of a godly saint who has faithfully walked with the Lord should be highly respected, but should not be considered as of the same authority as declarations in the Word of God. A favorite teacher may have vigorously, persuasively presented a position, but if the facts support a different view, we should yield to the facts. Many of us heard teachings in our youth that we have had to forsake as we came to know the Word of God more fully. Sound doctrine comes only from the Bible, not from schools or denominations.

Bible Conviction or Human Opinion

That the autographa were infallibly inspired by God, the message of God Himself perfectly, humanly recorded is clearly taught in Scripture (2 Tim 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21). From those originals, as copyists worked, human errors of sight and sound were not always discovered, despite thorough procedures and sincere dedication of early scribes. What is remarkable for the Hebrew text is that there are so few variants. Deliberate human change is very rare, often an honest attempt to clarify; at times only uncertainty about whether a word was marginal or textual. Inadvertent mistakes are relatively easy to recognize.

The situation regarding early copyists of the New Testament (in Greek) is much more difficult, more confusing, and thus more open to various interpretations. It is this New Testament textual material that most affects current discussions of texts and variations.

It should not be demeaning (but for some reason is taken that way) to say that it is important to know Greek in order to read Greek. Every pastor ought, if at all possible, to have a working acquaintance with Greek and Hebrew and with the textual apparatus which provides the factual data to be considered. There is nothing magical or secretive about the process that we engage in as we seek to know the certainty of God's message.

A significant step in the hermeneutical/exegetical process which we employ is realization of personal bias. In many ways it is more difficult to recognize our own bias than that of others. We can more easily see the presuppositional bias of an unbeliever or the denominational preference of a Lutheran, for instance. Being aware of our own cultural, linguistic, historical, academic, or practical viewpoints is not always judged to be as important, but it is.

What many think of as unmovable Biblical conviction is too often only strong personal prejudice. Our stand on what the Bible clearly declares should be firm. We must never back down regarding those things God has revealed; equally important, we must never elevate human opinion to the level of divine truth.

Fundamentals or Variations

In each local church, as in a theological seminary, there are great, significant agreements and minor, insignificant disagreements. What unites us far outweighs the distinguishable differences. The same can be said in the world at large for unions, political parties, fan clubs, or whatever. We are not different because we agree to disagree on many things.

We stand firmly aligned regarding two historic positions. For one, we are baptistic regarding faith and practice. For the other, we are fundamentalistic as over against the modernistic denials, usually briefly identified as five. (1) The inspiration and authority of the sixty-six books of the Bible. (2) The unchanging eternal existence of the second person of the Trinity. (3) The virgin birth as the miraculous means of incarnation of the eternal Son. (4) The substitutional death of that Son, shedding His blood in payment for the sins of all mankind. (5) The physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus, His ascension to sit as co-ruler on high, and His future, visible, physical return to earth to rule as predicted.

Unfortunately, in the area of our present investigations, some have posited the view that belief in the "King James Only" position is a fundamentalist belief. Historically, it has not been. Practically, it cannot be. As an emeritus separatist fundamentalist, I can bear witness that such was not even named among us half a century ago. Today, some of these may choose to try to exclude us; we prefer to include them, if they are genuinely born again and hold to the five historic beliefs of fundamentalists. We can fellowship with those who assert that the KJV is the only inspired English translation, but we do not consider that that view is fundamental or important enough to divide serious believers.

Only God, Not Man

A singularly significant verse is Deuteronomy 29:29. Information conveyed from God to men ought to be regarded as supremely precious and should be conscientiously conveyed to

succeeding generations. God has chosen to make known through human language the mysteries of the eternal mind. But God has also in His eternal wisdom realized that much of His eternal truth cannot and should not be conveyed to the sinful race. Where God has deemed it best not to make known or not to perform, we do well not to speculate.

We have sixty-six books, God's one and only revelation to the human race. None of us in this lifetime will fully comprehend the pertinent guidelines for daily conduct as set forth in those inscripturated sixty-six portions. And yet, it seems at times that we devote useless hours to endless speculation concerning matters which cannot be solved instead of accepting by faith the clear and adequate revelation God has given. We need to learn to let God be God.

Why did God totally control the human writers of the autographa and then not thereafter totally control each copyist? Why did God choose to make Himself known using Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek rather than English? Why has God not provided some authoritative papal envoy to pronounce translations either correct or inadequate? Why does God appoint that we should walk by faith and not by sight? Our answer must be Deuteronomy 29:29; we concur with what God has chosen to do and also with what He has chosen not to do.

Now, consider that it was all of grace that God permitted the race to persist after Adam sinned. Revelation and redemption are all of His grace; we deserve none of what He has provided, and can command no further revelation in our day. Instead, we need to stand in awe that He revealed Himself so clearly, so thoroughly, with many infallible proofs. We can marvel that His providential control of copyists has been such that the texts we work with are judged to be 99+% true to the autographa,¹⁴ that no doctrine is affected by the minutia of questionable variants, and that the Word we preach is the living and powerful (Heb 4:12) tool of the Holy Spirit.

¹⁴ Norman Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 307-8.

We do not expect problems of textual details to be solved until the millennium, when Jesus enthroned may choose to settle problems which plague us today. Consider the important teaching of Jesus in this regard, "For verily I say unto you, till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled" (Matt 5:18); "And it is easier for heaven and earth to pass, than one tittle of the law to fail" (Luke 16:17). The smallest letter (jot or yodh) and the significant distinguishing features of written letters (tittle) will still be extant when this present universe is destroyed by fire. Among the textual variants being considered by scholars today are the persisting elements controlled and guided by God; He has chosen to leave to us the process of distinguishing the worthy from the spurious. For this task, we have facts (extant variant readings) and we are expected to use Spirit-guided wisdom. Although we cannot reach perfection, we can seek perfection.

Jesus did not teach that every copy of the Hebrew Scriptures contains every letter and every correct feature of the written letters. He did not teach that any one text family would remain pure (there was no single errorless text of the Hebrew at the time of His incarnation). He certainly did not promise that one of the hundreds of foreign language translations (into English centuries later) would be fully accurate. He did, though, indicate the endurance of factual evidence which in God's judgment is ample for proper decisions regarding the autographa.

Jesus promised more than the continuation of inscribed letters in extant texts. He taught the certain fulfillment of all that God chose to make known unto mankind in His Word. All will be fulfilled (Matt 5:18), God's Word will not fail (Luke 16:17). Everything that God prophetically made known using words and written symbols (letters) will come to pass. Prophetic studies thus are even more important than discussions of text families and translation styles. All study of the Bible is work. Exegetical development, theological evaluation, practical, personal and social applications, the entire scope of Gospel endeavor demand time and effort. All of us must remain balanced, but in doing so we cannot afford to remain ignorant of any of the

evidences God has kept extant to enable us to weigh the exact written revelation as He first conveyed it to mankind.

The advice from one who has been preaching and teaching the Gospel for over half a century is really simple. Treat facts as facts and non-facts as of less significance. Firmly defend the truth which God has clearly made known, but do not unduly elevate notions of men to the status of unchanging truth. Exalt the truths we hold in common; be cautious about making mountains out of molehills. Preach the Word, for it is the power of God unto salvation.