Exactly what is God's promise to preserve His Word? How far does it extend? What does this mean for the church?

At the end of our last article, we posed the central question that every pastor and Christian scholar must face squarely and answer Biblically: Do you truly believe that God has kept and is keeping His promise to preserve His Word, intact and free from error, for all time and all eternity?

The sad fact is that most Evangelical pastors and academics of the present era cannot answer "Yes". They believe that God has permitted His Word to be corrupted over the centuries, and therefore it is up to fallen man to reconstruct and restore it by his own fallible reasoning.

"Leave It to the Academics"

Often, postmodern Evangelical pastors and scholars, while refusing to answer the question directly with an honest and forthright "No", instead respond with a barrage of technical jargon calculated to intimidate the average Christian who takes God at His Word into silence. In this they follow the pattern of the Darwinian evolutionist. The issues, they say, are far too complex for the uninitiated. They produce thick volumes on the minuta of manuscripts and miniscules, codexes and cursive, conations and emendations.

Some of these writers have launched frontal attacks on the authentic source texts, while more conservative Evangelicals have taken a more equivocal and indirect route to the same conclusion. But both say to the average Christian, in effect, "You are too
ignorant to understand this issue. Sit down, shut up, leave it to the academics, and take the Bible versions we give you."

**Metzger and Ehrman: A Frontal Attack on the Text**

Among those who launched frontal attacks on the authentic texts are the late Bruce M. Metzger and his protégé, Bart D. Ehrman. In 1964, Metzger first published his book titled *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*. The title itself encapsulates the Darwinistic view of the Biblical source texts that has come to dominate Evangelicalism. Four subsequent editions of Metzger's work have been published, the latest (2005) including contributions by Ehrman.

Metzger, an ordained minister of the apostate Presbyterian Church USA and a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, was an open theological liberal during his entire lifetime. Ehrman, a professor at the University of North Carolina who is an alumnus of Moody Bible Institute, Wheaton College, and Princeton Seminary where he studied under Metzger, called himself an Evangelical at the time he collaborated with Metzger, but has more recently come out of the closet and admitted that he is actually an agnostic.

Metzger's and Ehrman's Darwinistic views of the Biblical text have over time become increasingly accepted among Evangelicals. They are quoted favorably in many books on the text of Scripture by postmodern Evangelicals, and even by men who claim to be rock-ribbed fundamentalists. Metzger and Ehrman dismissed the Received Text, the body of manuscripts that can be readily proved to be the authentic text of Scripture, as a completely discredited text that has survived only by being accorded "superstitious reverence" by extreme traditionalists.[1] In over 350 pages, Metzger and Ehrman avoid all discussion of the Biblical passages in which God sets forth his promise to preserve His Word.
Postmodernist "Conservatives" - Reaching the Same Destination by a Different Route

Reformed Baptist James White, in his book The King James Only Controversy[2], glosses over valid assertions that the vast majority of Bible versions produced in the last 130 years are based on counterfeit texts that were corrupted over many centuries, not accidentally through errors by copyists, but deliberately through revision by heretics. He does this by largely ignoring such evidence, and only really addressing the false conspiracy theories of King-James-Only advocates such as Gail Ripliinger and Peter Ruckman, who are in fact heretics and a shameful discredit to the church.

The title of White's book encapsulates the way in which most postmodern Evangelicals ignore the real issue. Defense of the Received Text has, in the vast majority of cases, been positioned by Received Text opponents as synonymous with a defense of the King James Bible. Another book that does this is From the Mind of God to the Mind of Man: A Layman's Guide to How We Got Our Bible, produced by a committee of fundamentalist Baptists mainly associated with Bob Jones University and the Fundamental Baptist Fellowship.[3] Their work positions the issue as a conflict between "King James advocates" and "King James discreditors" and by turns ignores or whitewashes the evidence against those who have promoted counterfeit source texts.

True defense of the Received Text does not entail defense of the King James Bible, or of any particular translation of the Word, in English or any other language. The issue we must focus upon in our time is the defense of the identity of the authentic original-language source texts - those which are the ones that fulfill God's promise to faithfully preserve His Word. These texts, and no others, must be used to produce faithful translations of Scripture in all languages and in all generations. There is no possibility of a fully faithful translation of God's Word without exclusive use of the Received Text.
Why Are They Wrong?

This brings us to the questions with which we ended our last article. Why are postmodern Evangelicals wrong when they assert that we are dealing with corrupted source texts, and that the authentic Word of God must be restored by the hand and reason of man through an esoteric and artificial process? What exactly is God's promise to preserve His Word? How far does it extend? How must Christian academia and the church approach the Bible, based on a proper understanding of God’s promise?

What Exactly Is God’s Promise to Preserve His Word?

How can we know that we have an authentic original today, thousands of years after the Bible was written?

The Bible itself gives us the answer. The same God who calls upon His people to obey the Bible alone in every area of life and ministry has also made a vital promise concerning His Word: He will preserve it and keep it pure in all ages. We have this promise from Christ Himself, who declared that until heaven and earth shall pass away, not a single letter nor even the smallest stroke of a single letter of the Scriptures shall be taken away (Matthew 5:18). Jesus also said that "the Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35). We have God’s promise that "the Word of the Lord endures forever" (Isaiah 40:8).

In Brief: The Promise in Operation

Although we do not have the original manuscripts, it is clear that God has providentially preserved His Word in the original languages. There is more manuscript evidence for the authenticity of the Old and New Testaments than for any other book, ancient or modern. For example, there are over 5,000 manuscripts of the books of the Greek New Testament, some of them from as early as 50 years after the time of the apostles. By comparison, there are only seven available manuscripts of the writings of
Plato, and the earliest is from 1,200 years after his death. Yet postmodern scholars rarely question the authenticity of the writings of Plato, while constantly questioning the authenticity of the New Testament!

The Hebrew text. Beginning with Moses, God made provisions for the preservation of the Hebrew text of the Torah (the first five books of the Bible). Every Israelite was commanded to know the Torah and to teach it to his children (e.g., Deuteronomy 4:9, 6:6-9, 11:19). An original copy of the Torah was kept in the Ark of the Covenant (Deuteronomy 31:19-29) which was first in the tabernacle and later in the temple. In due course, Hebrew historians tell us, manuscripts of the books of the rest of the Old Testament were added until they became a complete authoritative manuscript of the Old Testament.

At the time of the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 A.D., Jewish scholars met at Jamnia, northeast of Gaza, and began what became the work of the Masoretes, Jewish scribes who preserved the authentic text until the 11th century. Other scribes took over the work until the 15th century. In the 16th century, Jacob ben Chayim produced an authenticated version of the Masoretic text which has come to be known as the Hebrew portion of the Received Text. This is the source text for the Geneva Bible used by the Pilgrims (1560), the King James Bibles of both 1611 and 1769 (the Authorized Version used today), and the New King James Bible (1982).

The Greek text. Over 5,000 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament exist today, some from the early decades after the apostles. Most of these support what is called the Byzantine body of manuscripts. Beginning in the 1500s, scholars such as Erasmus, Stephens, and Beza used these manuscripts to compile the Greek New Testament portion of what is now called the Received Text of the Bible. In the process, they recognized that other texts - especially those that had been promoted by the Vatican for centuries - were corrupted counterfeits.
The Protestant Reformers and their successors used the Received Text to produce the English Bibles named above, among others. In the 1800s, English scholar John Burgon did extensive research proving that the Greek text used by the post-apostolic church fathers was the same as what is now known as the Received Text.

**What About the Critical Text?**

However, in the late 1800s another form of the Greek New Testament, called by various names (e.g., Alexandrian, Westcott-Hort, Nestle-Aland, or Critical Text), became the one used for most New Testament translations. This text omits many words, verses, and passages found in the Received Text and in the translations that are based on it. The Critical Text is based on a small handful of Greek manuscripts dating from the 4th century onward. The Critical Text varies greatly from Greek New Testament quotations found in the writings of post-apostolic church fathers. The Critical Text differs from the Received Text over 5,300 times, omitting over 2,800 words from the Gospels alone. Many of these omissions affect essential doctrines such as the deity and virgin birth of Christ.

**How Far Does God’s Promise of Preservation Extend?**

In this era of saturation postmodernism, believers must always remember that God the Holy Spirit chose the words of Scripture with the utmost precision and meticulous purpose.

Every word of Scripture - even the tenses of verbs, and the use of the singular versus the plural - is absolutely vital in the revelation of the eternal plan of God (see, for example, Matthew 22:23-33, Matthew 22:41-46, and Galatians 3:16-19).[4] Jesus proclaimed that "not one jot or tittle" of Scripture would remain unfulfilled (Matthew 5:18, Luke 16:17). The "jot" (Hebrew yod, Greek iota) was the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The "tittle" was a tiny stroke added to letters of the Hebrew alphabet
to indicate specific meaning in a word in context. God's purpose and precision in the penning and preservation of Scripture extends even to these minutest details.

We live in a time when the idea that words have meaning in context has been swept aside by a flood of postmodernist revisionism - even in the church. But our God is no postmodernist, and no believer can be one either. His Word is not a book of contradictions, and it is not a wax nose that we can twist and shape according to our whims and feelings. This is why meticulously accurate translation of the Scriptures, using the most reliable manuscripts in the original languages, is absolutely vital. It is also the reason why careful exposition of the actual meaning of Scripture by the man in the pulpit is so very essential.

Indeed, "Every word of God is pure; He is a shield to those who put their trust in Him. Do not add to His words, lest He rebuke you, and you be found a liar" (Proverbs 30:5-6).

**Divine Preservation: The Believing Church's Historic Position**

This is the historic position of the believing church as expressed in its confessional documents of the Reformation era. Both the Presbyterian Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) and the Baptist London Confession (1689) include these words:

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; [Matt. 5:18; Psa. 119:89] 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 into the vulgar [i.e. common] 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.
Likewise, the French Confession of 1559:

We believe that the Word contained in these books [the 66 books of the Bible] has proceeded from God, and receives its authority from Him alone, and not from men. And inasmuch as it is the rule of all truth, containing all that is necessary for the service of God and for our salvation, it is not lawful for men, nor even for angels, to add to it, to take away from it, or to change it. Whence it follows that no authority, whether of antiquity, or custom, or numbers, or human wisdom, or judgments, or proclamations, or edicts, or decrees, or councils, or visions, or miracles, should be opposed to these Holy Scriptures, but, on the contrary, all things should be examined, regulated, and reformed according to them.

These stalwarts believed God's promise to preserve His Word - not just in some general way but down to the jot and tittle - and they treated His precious Word accordingly.

**A Striking Parallel With the Creation-Evolution Controversy**

In sad contrast, postmodernist Evangelicals have indeed embraced a Darwinistic view of the Biblical source texts. This is yet another way in which the source text issue parallels the creationist/evolutionist controversy. Creationists and evolutionists (including postmodernist Evangelicals who try to shoehorn Genesis into evolutionism) both have an essential (and to each side non-negotiable) presupposition. Creationists say, "We believe in a universe that was supernaturally created (Genesis 1-2) and is supernaturally sustained (Colossians 1:17, Hebrews 1:3), and God is our authority for this belief." Evolutionists say, "We believe in a universe that is the result of naturalistic processes, and is sustained naturalistically, and human wisdom is our authority for this belief."

Presuppositions of the same nature lie behind the Received Text and Critical Text positions. The former is supernaturalistic: "We believe that we have a supernaturally authored and supernaturally preserved inspired and inerrant original, and that Book
itself is our authority for this belief." The latter is naturalistic: "We believe that we have a collection of the writings of men that were inspired and inerrant when originally written, but have been corrupted over the centuries, and the lost original must be - if possible - reconstructed, and man's wisdom is the authority in that restoration process."

This is the essence of the issue. Which will we choose? Divine preservation of the text of Scripture, or human restoration? Supernaturalism or naturalism? God's infallible authority and infinite power, or man's fallible calculations and utter weakness?

Next: What About the Arguments of Those Who Say This Is Not a Vital Issue?

References:


2. White, James, The King James Only Controversy: Can You Trust Modern Translations? (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2009)


4. For a detailed discussion of these passages, see our Bible Knowledgebase article, Can the Meaning of Vital Doctrine Hinge on a Single Word?
Biblical Preservation: B. B. Warfield and the Reformation Doctrine of the Providential Preservation of the Biblical Text. Rev. Mr. Louis DeBoer. Rather they supported this doctrine of the divine preservation of the Scriptures with an abundance of Scripture proofs. Some of the proof-texts for this doctrine are 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. Matthew 5:18. "(3) Are naturalistic New Testament textual critics providentially guided? Many conservatives have adopted the theory that it is through textual criticism, and especially through the textual criticism of Westcott and Hort, that Christ has fulfilled his promise always to preserve in His Church the True New Testament Text. Inspired preservation-a study of the inseparable relationship between biblical inspiration and preservation. By jesse M. boyd. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the biblical doctrine of preservation and establish its inseparable relationship with the doctrine of inspiration. 6John W. Burgon, The Traditional Text of the Holy Gospels in Unholy Hands On The Bible, Vol. 1, Including the Complete Works of John W. Burgon, Dean of Chichester, Ed. by Jay P. Green (Lafayette, IN: Sovereign Grace Trust Fund, 1990), 7. 4. This is simply because the crux of his argument in The King James Version Defended deals with the New Testament, the battleground for naturalistic textual criticism. In other words, does the Bible we have in our hands today and on our shelves say the same thing as the first editions written in the first century AD? Enter books, and literally millennia, have been dedicated to this subject. So I cannot cover near the amount of breadth we would need to for this article. But we can touch on some of the basics and why we need to learn about the doctrine of preservation as Christians. What Is the Doctrine of Preservation? As stated above, the doctrine of preservation simply means that the copy process of Scripture held true to the originals. That scribes didn't add any bits they liked or any political agendas. Many people argue that Scripture got tampered with over time and that Christians introduced new elements to the Bible to make their case. In the above, the authors of the Chicago Statement have redefined the Biblical and historical doctrine of Inerrancy from the Divine preservation of a 100% pure Bible to mans restoration of an almost pure Bible. This change in the definition of inerrancy from preservation to restoration is noted by Dr. Edward Hills. Naturalistic New Testament textual criticism requires us to treat the text of the New Testament like the text of any other ancient book, in other words, to ignore or deny the special providential preservation of the Scriptures. Hence if we really believe in the special providential preservation of the Scriptures, then we cannot follow the naturalistic method of New Testament textual criticism. naturally view and replace it with a biblical view of human development. Seemingly, the naturalistic view of humanity and human development has been widely accepted. uses divine providence has destined this or that man; but this is certain, that out of the poorest, the most abject, and the most obscure, He has produced. The biblical metanarrative of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration in relationship to the imago Dei and cognitive development as found in the Bible will be explored (11).