



But do we really have the Bible?

As reformed Christians, we make a lot of what we call the infallibility of the Bible. Without going into that subject as such, we simply believe that God wrote the Bible, albeit through human authors, and therefore it cannot contain any errors because, i) God Himself cannot lie, and ii) He is all-powerful and can therefore preserve the men who wrote it from making mistakes. We don't claim that for every Greek and Hebrew manuscript; much less do we claim it for every translation. In fact, we don't claim it for any translation or any Greek or Hebrew manuscript. But we believe that the original manuscripts, the ones actually written by the prophets and apostles as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit, as God breathed out His Word to them, the autographs (as we call them), were absolutely without error. But, of course, none of those exist any longer, to our knowledge. And there's the rub.

Many, even some who claim to be Christians, will retort and ask, "What is the use of standing on some infallible Bible when that infallible Bible does not, in fact, exist?" Not a bad question. How do we answer it?

I have in my files a will telling how I would like all my great estate disposed of when I die. However, so far as the law is concerned, I don't have my will in my files. The one I have is not even signed. The actual will, typed up by my solicitor's secretary and signed is in the solicitor's office. Yet, if I want to remind myself where I decided I wanted all my earthly goods to go when I die, I can take that photocopy out of my file and know, with absolute accuracy, exactly what I said however many years ago when I wrote it. On the one hand, I don't have my will; yet, on the other, I have the very, accurate to the last full-stop, text of my will.

No photocopiers or presses

But when the Bible was written, and it must have been copied numerous times (we have something like 5,000 manuscripts of the NT), we did not have photo-copiers to copy it absolutely accurately. We didn't have printing presses either until 500 years ago. To copy a Bible you had a room with maybe twenty people in it sitting at desks with a quill and ink well and one would read and the other nineteen would write. But, since to be human is to err, they made mistakes and some of those mistakes got through and have come down to us today. So again, there is that nagging question: where is this infallible Bible we make so much of?

We could look at the question this way. All those copiers would not all have made the same mistakes. So if you have, for example, out of those nineteen copies, one that says differently from the other eighteen at one point, we know that the eighteen are right and that is the correct text. By this sort of process, scholars are able, by comparing manuscript with manuscript, to find the correct text as God gave it to the original authors. It is true, we don't have the original manuscripts written by the prophets and apostles which God breathed into them and which were, every jot and tittle of them, without error. But we do have the text of what they wrote without error. Even as, if my solicitor's safe were burgled and that real will stolen and lost, I still have the absolutely inerrant text of that will in my file.

That process of manuscript comparison is what has been done to produce what many scholars today believe to be the most accurate text of the Bible and from which the modern translations come. There is a small group of scholars who disagree with them and still believe the old Textus Receptus from which the King James Version came is the most accurate text. But in fact, the same process was done by late medieval/renaissance scholars to give us that. But all this gives us

another question; there is still not agreement about what is the true text of the Bible. And that is true – and the process is not quite as simple as I have described. So, are the King James Greek and Hebrew manuscripts really the Bible God gave? Or are those behind the NASB/NIV?

Are any doctrines in danger?

Let me ask another question to try to put this in perspective. Will we have any disagreements if we use either of these sets of manuscripts? Are any doctrines in danger? There are none in danger at all. Sometimes sceptics will wave before us those 5,000 manuscripts with their 10,000 variations, so again, where is this infallible Bible? But the vast majority of those 10,000 variations are punctuation or spelling discrepancies. There is only 2% of the NT where there is any real question about the true text, but there is not one, either major or minor, teaching in danger, whatever group of texts you use.

That is one way we could look at the question. But let us look at it from another angle, because what is really important is not how we might try to put the true text of the Bible together, valid as that might be. This whole question reflects on the integrity of God and His whole work of salvation in the world. The Psalmists often speak of God as the Rock of our Salvation. We are told that God doesn't change and that He is always a faithful Saviour. And this is how the Westminster Confession speaks about the matter;

The OT in Hebrew (which was the native language of the people of God of old), and the NT 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 (Westminster, 1.8).

The Confession doesn't talk about human scholarship uncovering the true text of the Bible so that God's Word will be preserved in the world. It talks about God preserving His own Word. Why does the Confession speak in this way? Why should we believe, by whatever human means God has used, that the Bibles we have in our hands are the infallible Scriptures and contain the infallible truth that God gave to the ancient writers so many years ago? Let me suggest three reasons. Firstly,

1. Because God has promised to preserve His Word to us

Ps.119 says, "*Your word, O Lord, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens... Long ago I learned from your statutes that you established them to last forever... All your words are true; all your righteous laws are eternal.*" What those verses are saying is that God never changes His Word after He has spoken it; once spoken, in heaven His Word stands. But they say more than that because God did not just speak in heaven. I don't know that God needs to make statutes or laws for the benefit of heaven. When the Psalmists speaks about Laws, He is talking, primarily, about those given for His people on earth and He says they are established forever.

Jesus speaks in exactly the same way. In Matthew 5:17f., He says,

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.

What Jesus is talking about here is the whole OT – it was often referred to by the Jews as "*the Law and the prophets.*" Jesus says that none of it will disappear until the history of the world is finished. And what He says about the Old applies also to the New for the New is only the fulfilment and full explanation of the Old. Peter puts the writings of Paul in the same category with the OT and calls them both simply "*the Scriptures.*" There is a process unfolding here. The Psalmist praised the Law of Moses; Jesus praised the Law and the prophets (which, as a catch-phrase, included the Psalms); and Peter praised the Law and the prophets and Paul – all of which together he calls

Scriptures. They are all one and Jesus says of them that they will never disappear. We should simply believe what Jesus has said about them.

Another reason we should believe the Bibles we have in our hands is;

2. Because Jesus prayed we would be sanctified by the Word

In 2 Timothy 3, Paul exhorts Timothy to "*continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, ... the truth of the Holy Scriptures which are able to make you wise unto salvation.*" To Titus Paul said, "*God's salvation has appeared to us teaching us to say no to ungodliness and worldly passions and, instead to live upright and godly lives in this present age while we wait for the blessed hope,*" the coming again of Jesus. He tells us to do this because Jesus gave Himself not so much to save us from hell, but "*to save us from all wickedness.*"

In other words, by Jesus' death we are justified; God declares us not guilty. He sees us now as righteous persons. Well now we are actually to become, in ourselves, righteous and holy people. We are to grow in sanctification. How? In His high-priestly prayer, Jesus prayed for His disciples,

"Father, sanctify them, make them holy by the truth; Your Word is truth."

We are to grow in sanctification, we are to grow more holy, more like the Lord Jesus Christ in heart and life, by the truth which for us today is found in the Word of God written. Jesus prayed that prayer for us. If God does not preserve that Word pure to the end of the age, how will that prayer of Jesus for us be fulfilled? How will we His people become more and more sanctified?

How did Jesus defeat temptation? By using against Satan the OT. And to follow Jesus and also defeat temptation, we must do the same. A servant is not above his master here either. But Jesus came as the Word par excellence. If Jesus could appeal to the OT, surely we can therefore appeal to Him? But how will we do that if it is not preserved purely in the NT Scriptures?

Then also, and very closely related to this, we ought to believe Jesus when He says that none of the written Word will disappear.

3. Because the security of our hope and all our Christian comfort depends upon the Word

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

1 Peter 1:35

That is a beautiful promise – that we have that hope in the midst of whatever trouble and trials we have to undergo in this world. But how do we know about it? Through the Bible! How do we know it is true unless we can believe that the Bible is true and has been preserved from error? What say it is exactly this verse that has been embellished a bit by some over-zealous scribe to keep up our flagging spirits? If that were so, then we're in the same leaky boat as we would be if the resurrection were not true and of all men we are the most miserable. If this is the way God deals with us, then you may as well give it all away and eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die. He is then merely playing games with us for He tells us that "*everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope* (Romans 15)."

What real hard-nosed encouragement can we take from them if we cannot also believe that God has preserved the promises of the Scriptures as He actually gave them – well, if He actually gave them?

John Stott says, *"Is it not inconceivable that God should first have spoken and acted in Christ and then have allowed His saving word and deed to be lost in the mists of antiquity?"*

(The Essentials, Edwards & Stott, p.83)

Exactly. Jesus said, *"I will preserve my Church."* Jesus' Church was established on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. If the foundation is not preserved pure and sure, how can that Church be preserved?

As I said earlier, this question is not really a technical question about the Bible and its manuscripts. It is really a question about the integrity and faithfulness of God. We have the true text of the Bible in our Bibles today and through it we may be encouraged and strengthened and comforted. Every bit as much as Jesus will preserve His Church and purify her, so will He also preserve His Word pure for that is how He prayed and that is how He promised He would preserve a faithful Church until the end of the age.

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