

Churches: The “How” of Perfect Preservation

by Kent Brandenburg

Not everyone who calls himself even a conservative evangelical believes that God promised in the Bible to preserve every Word. W. Edward Glenny writes: “[N]o statement in Scripture . . . can establish the doctrine of the preservation of the text of Scripture.” However, most professing fundamentalists admit, even if grudgingly, that the Bible teaches its own preservation. Usually, they will quickly add: “It doesn’t teach how.” So they say they believe in the reality of the preservation of the Words of Scripture, but not the means by which preservation would take place.

THE MEANS OF PRESERVATION

God does say how. In the Old Testament He used Israel and in the New Testament, the church (study the Hebrew word for “keep” [*shamar* and *natsar*] in the OT and the Greek word, *tareo*, in the NT). “Unto [Israel was] committed the oracles of God” (Romans 3:2). The nation passed it down generation after generation (Acts 7:38), also using the family to do so (Deuteronomy 11:18-21).

Colossians 4:16 provides a case study for seeing how the church would keep God’s Words: “And when this epistle is read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and that ye likewise read the *epistle* from Laodicea.” Likewise, in 1 Thessalonians, Paul wrote, “I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read unto all the holy brethren” (5:27). From Thessalonica believers everywhere were to get their copies of this canonical epistle. The Jews copied, passed down and along, and read the Old Testament; and the churches continued this pattern in the New Testament. A large majority of the copies of Scripture that we possess come from the region of Asia Minor (the Byzantine empire) where Paul started His churches. This Scriptural understanding of the means of preservation is stated by Richard Capel in 1658:

God committed the Hebrew text of the Old Testament to the Jewes, and did and doth move their hearts to keep it untainted to this day: So I dare lay it on the same God, that he in his providence is so with the Church of the Gentiles, that they have and do preserve the Greek Text uncorrupt. (Capel’s Remains, London, 1658, p. 83)

CANONIZATION

Closely related to how the churches preserved God’s Words is the doctrine of canonicity. Scripture teaches the canonicity of the Words of God. Christ promised “that when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth” (John

16:13). Early church believers recognized canonical writ, even as Peter in 1 Peter 3:15-16 writes: “[O]ur beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him hath written unto you; as also in all *his* epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as *they do* also the other scriptures.” Peter knew that what Paul wrote was Scripture. The Holy Spirit guided His churches generation after generation to copy and then agree upon His Words. The canonization of the Books were a logical extension of the Scriptural doctrine of canonization of Words.

That the Spirit would lead New Testament churches into all truth is a matter of faith. That very faith has manifested itself in agreement on what the Books of the Bible are, and just as much what its Words are. Recognition of God’s Words is not a science, but an act of Divine intervention and illumination. The churches made copies of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, not the other books. The proverb for the perfection of the Words was: “What mistake is in one copy is corrected in another.” Through His Spirit God would preserve His Words through His churches.

Was canonization a miracle? Yes. Was canonization by supernatural divine intervention? Yes. In canonizing Scripture did God the Holy Spirit work through the churches, directing them to the Words inspired by God? Yes. Was canonization an act of inspiration? No. Canonization and inspiration are two different acts of the Holy Spirit. A belief in canonization is not some form of double inspiration. The leading of the Spirit in identifying His Word to the believer and protecting His Words from error is the ongoing operation of God by which He preserves His Words.

To discredit the mighty, gracious activity of the Almighty, His preservation of His Words, some have questioned this doctrine, accusing it of recent origins. Believers, however, have historically applied this to the Word of God, even as we read in the *Westminster Confession*: “[O]ur 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.”

On the other hand, the brand new doctrine, concocted from human reasoning, is the “science” of textual criticism, leaving the doubtful care of God’s Word to a handful of man-made criteria, crafted by men who rejected the doctrine of divine preservation. We shun this novel humanistic approach for God-ordained reliance on the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Several times the New Testament says something like it does in 1 Thessalonians 2:13, “When ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received *it* not *as* the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God,” which mirrors what Jesus said in

John 17:18, “For I have given unto them the words which thou gavest me; and they have received *them*.” Even on the day of Pentecost, conversion is described as “they that gladly received his word” (Acts 2:41). The churches received God’s Words as led by the Holy Spirit, so it is no wonder that the terminology used to name their first printed copies in 1633 was *textus receptus* (TR), the mindset of God’s churches through history. As the Holy Spirit bore witness in the believer’s hearts to the Words of God, they received them.

No single individual can be the pillar and ground of the truth. The Holy Spirit directs through the church, not through one man. Agreement on the text of Scripture comes from the unity of the Spirit. In contrast, eclecticism is the practice of one man choosing the Words of God, essentially canonizing Scripture on the spot, regardless of what churches have already agreed.

Finally, after centuries of handwritten copies, the printing press was invented and God gave the churches the opportunity to bring the text of Scripture into one printed edition. The English speaking people had uniquely responded to the Word of God. They, more than any one culture, devoted themselves to the Bible in their own language. After their finest scholars finished their translation of the Bible in 1611 (the King James Version), their churches agreed upon it as the Word of God. The Words of God were settled for the people of God. For at least 300 years after, the KJV was the Bible for God’s English-speaking believers. The Spirit canonized the Words of Scripture through the churches.

CONCLUSION

The Bible does tell us how God would preserve all of His Words. He would use His congregation to do it, Israel in the Old Testament and the church in the New. By means of the Holy Spirit, God used the congregation of the righteous to recognize and then settle on the Words of Scripture. Revelation 22:18-19 warns against adding or taking away from the Words of this Book.

For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and *from* the things which are written in this book.

If the Words of Scripture were not settled, no one could possibly violate God’s instructions here. God did lead His people into Truth and continues to keep His Words by means of His Spirit through the churches.