

**“Manuscripts and Misquoting, Inspiration and Apologetics”**  
**Lutheran Concerns Association Annual Conference, January 19 2015<sup>1</sup>**  
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Each Sunday we confess that the Holy Spirit “spoke by the prophets.” We learned from our youth that “we do not despise preaching and his word, but hold it sacred, and gladly hear and learn it.” These are confessions that have been handed down to us, which we receive, and which we pass along. They did not originate with us. Their truthfulness does not depend upon us or upon our reasoning. And they do not need to prove themselves to us. We receive them, we are formed into them, because they summarize for us the truth of the Scriptures. That the Holy Spirit spoke by the prophets is a confession, not an argument. It is not “provable” nor does it need proving. That preaching and the Word is sacred does not need to be tested – even if sometimes we preachers may make it difficult to hear that Word clearly.

“But not all have this knowledge,” to borrow, non-contextually, from the Apostle Paul (1 Cor 8:7). The reliability of the text of the New Testament has been called into question in the popular mind. An adjunct instructor at one of the Concordia University schools posted questions from his students about the origins and veracity of the Biblical text. Among these students’ questions:

“How or who initiated putting the writings of the Bible together as one book?”

“Whoever compiled the Bible, how did they decide which stories to publish and which ones to leave out?”

“How were the books of bible chosen to become the bible as we know it today?”

“How do we know that the word of God has not been altered by man throughout the years and in the years w[h]ere no word was written down in particular?”<sup>2</sup>

These are not the questions of radical skeptics who are attacking the Bible. They are students at a Lutheran university who have heard bits and pieces—from who knows where—about the origins and transmission of “The Bible.” The last question in particular shows that these students have been exposed to the idea that the biblical text is unreliable. That it has been collected together, copied, and altered by people, and therefore, they think, we cannot be certain that we can trust it.

These questions have likely been prompted by the flotsam and jetsam of the fragmented media culture in which we live. In the torrent of information that is accessible

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<sup>2</sup> <http://infanttheology.wordpress.com/2014/01/21/what-is-the-meaning-of-bart-ehrman-mountain-or-molehill/>, posted January 21, 2014.

from an astonishing array of sources, only the loudest, most virulent, and most outrageous claims will be heard. In the realm of religion, the iconoclastic depictions that flood movie theaters and Netflix (The Davinci Code movie and Bill Maher's Religulous), the over-hyped claims of the *Gospel of Judas* and the so-called "Gospel of Jesus Wife" (both of which received severe criticism after initial sensationalist reporting), and the unregulated Wild West of Youtube and Facebook, voices that undermine traditional Christian faith and belief rise and embed themselves in popular consciousness. Even among the more informed—by that I mean people who actually read books—these questions are standard fare. A New York Times bestseller in the religion category, Bart Ehrman's provocatively titled *Misquoting Jesus: The Story of Who Changed the Bible and Why* (from which the title of the essay is drawn) contains within itself the assumption that the "Bible" is unreliable. It caused a great stir with claims such as this:

How does it help us to say that the Bible is the inerrant word of God if in fact we don't have the words that God inerrantly inspired, but only the words copied by scribes—sometimes correctly but (many times!) incorrectly?<sup>3</sup>

Ehrman's book was a smash success, leading even to appearances on both The Daily Show with John Stewart<sup>4</sup> and The Colbert Report<sup>5</sup>—certainly the only biblical scholar to ever make the late night TV circuit. The young people of our congregations and schools have no doubt been affected by this discourse.

What is mocked as unreasonable is the confession of the church from the beginning: that the Holy Spirit spoke by the prophets. A recent study on the views of early church fathers regarding inspiration and interpretation states simply: "All Christians in the early church believed that Scripture was inspired by God. It seems that believing in the inspiration of Scripture was an entailment of being Christian."<sup>6</sup> This fundamental confession was so axiomatic that discussion was not necessary in the confessions of the Reformation period—there was no debate between Lutherans and Romans regarding the inspiration of Scripture, neither did the Enthusiasts or Reformed believe otherwise.

But inspiration is challenged today. Return to that argument from Ehrman: "If God really wanted people to have his actual words, surely he would have miraculously preserved those words, just as he had miraculously inspired them in the first place. Given that he didn't preserve the words, the conclusion must be that he hadn't gone to the trouble of inspiring them."<sup>7</sup> That argument makes a key assumption that should be questioned: That "inspiration" can only be accepted if there has been a perfect preservation of the inspired text in the manuscripts. In Ehrman's view, there must be evidence of the

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<sup>3</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2006), 7.

<sup>4</sup> Aired March 14, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Aired June 20, 2006. Colbert, who plays (ironically) an ultra-conservative character, started the interview with the line: "Dr. Ehrman, Let me lay my cards on the table here. I believe that the Bible is inerrant, without flaw, and directly from the mouth of God. Let's have a reasonable discussion." The crowd responded with roars of laughter.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Graves, *The Inspiration and Interpretation of Scripture. What the Early Church Can Teach Us* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 4.

<sup>7</sup> Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 211.

perfection of the text before the inspiration and authority of the text can be accepted. Is this a point that should be granted?

## Empiricism and the Manuscripts

The eighteenth century Enlightenment, with its anthropocentric foundation of human observation and reason as the standard for determining truth, was to have a profound affect on the way that the New Testament was understood. Its assumptions, still held today, seriously challenge the authority of Scripture. One study of the history of NT interpretation since the Enlightenment begins:

The critical study of the Bible began in the eighteenth century. At a time when all fields of study were undergoing a revolution, so, too, was the investigation of the NT. The old ways, with their authoritarian presuppositions and orthodox conclusions, were being challenged. The new methods of science, devoted to empirical observation and rational deduction, swelled into a tidal wave, engulfing the entire intellectual landscape.<sup>8</sup>

The major struggle in the earliest period was the challenge to the supernatural: The NT was viewed as providing unreliable information about the life of Jesus, in particular his miracles and resurrection. The transmission of the text itself and the variations between the manuscripts was not initially a significant topic of discussion.<sup>9</sup>

However, in 1710 the British theologian John Mill produced a magnificent edition of the Greek New Testament. His goal was to provide the evidence of the manuscripts alongside the standard printed text. Mill printed (with slight modification) the text of Erasmus, known today as “The *Textus Receptus*,” first edited 200 years earlier. But he also printed, at the foot of the page, readings from other manuscripts that differed from this edition. This is now common practice; virtually every edition of the Greek New Testament ever since has noted differences in the manuscripts, and even English translations since the 19<sup>th</sup> century have noted places where manuscripts have different readings.<sup>10</sup> While standard practice now, Mill’s mere presentation of the manuscript evidence brought significant criticism from some theologians. For example, Daniel Whitby, a Protestant theologian criticized this move:

“I GRIEVE therefore, and am vexed, that I have found so much in Mill’s Prolegomena which seems quite plainly to render the standard of faith insecure, at best to give

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<sup>8</sup> William Baird, *History of New Testament Research. Volume One: From Deism to Tübingen* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 3.

<sup>9</sup> The first discussion of the problem of the text *per se* was by a Roman Catholic apologist, Richard Simon, who criticized the Protestant teaching of *sola scriptura*. In part, his argument contrasted the uncertainty of the Greek text with what he perceived to be the consistency of the Latin Vulgate text, with its stamp of long usage in the Roman church. A new translation of this work is available as *Richard Simon. Critical History of the Text of the New Testament. Wherein is established the Truths of the Acts on which the Christian Religion is Based*. Translated, Introduced, and Annotated by Andrew Hunwick (NTTSD 43; Leiden: Brill, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> Translations vary in the number of differences cited, but all commonly used translations, including the ESV, NIV, and NASB, note the differences in the manuscripts at, for example, Mark 16:8 and John 7:53.

others too good a handle for doubting; or to add strength and support to the wretched arguments of the Papists and others against this rule.”<sup>11</sup>

Whitby is writing 200 years after the end of the use of manuscripts in the church. The printing press and mechanical reproduction had made it possible for scholars to reconstruct a single form of the text, have it mass produced on a large scale, and market it so that it alone becomes identified as the “original text.” As we will see below, the early theologians of the church did not always see the differences among the manuscripts as a problem. Whitby, by contrast has a view of Scripture that causes him to view the very manuscripts that carry the text as a problem. As if the text were somehow accessible apart from the manuscripts.

It is a small step from Whitby’s line of argumentation to the KJV-only movement that developed in 20<sup>th</sup> century America. Among its strongest proponents was Edward Hills, whose book *The King James Version Defended! A Christian View of the New Testament Manuscripts*<sup>12</sup> argued for the “doctrine” of “Providential Preservation”: “It must be that down through the centuries God has exercised a special, providential control over the copying of the Scriptures and the preservation and use of the original text have been available to God’s people in every age.”<sup>13</sup> His Six Axioms of Fundamental Criticism” argued:

1. The purpose of the providential preservation of the New Testament is to preserve the infallibility of the inspired original text,
2. This providential preservation concentrated itself on the Greek New Testament text,
3. This providential preservation operated within the sphere of the Greek Church,
4. This providential preservation operated through the testimony of the Holy Spirit,
5. The text of the majority of the manuscripts is the providentially preserved and approved text,
6. The text of the majority of the manuscripts is the standard text.<sup>14</sup>

Numerous problems may be highlighted in this “doctrine” of “providential preservation,” which is not taught in Scripture nor (in this form) prior to the Enlightenment: the issue of the Latin text, for which there is nearly double the number of manuscripts as of the Greek text, and why the Holy Spirit worked this “providential preservation” only in the Greek Orthodox church—and further the question of why the Holy Spirit would have allowed this church to be the sole deposit of a perfect text while this same church had lost doctrine of justification by faith. There is also the unproven assertion that the “text of the majority of manuscripts” is the providentially preserved text. His arguments do not adequately deal with the late date of those manuscripts. Neither do they account for the historical reasons that those manuscripts were the majority in the late medieval period but not earlier. In short, Hills defense of inspiration falls because it does not deal honestly or accurately with the manuscripts themselves.

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<sup>11</sup> Cited from Adam Fox, *John Mill and Richard Bentley: A Study of the Textual Criticism of the New Testament 1675-1729* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1954), 106. Emphasis original.

<sup>12</sup> Published in Des Moines, Iowa: Christian Research Press, 1956.

<sup>13</sup> Hills, *King James Version Defended*, 8.

<sup>14</sup> Hills, *King James Version Defended*, 30-35.

Notice that Hills' argument is essentially identical to Whitby's: In order to have an inspired text, there must be perfect copies of that text, with no imperfections or questions. This is the same premise that Ehrman uses to deny inspiration: Because there is no perfect copy, and the manuscripts show alterations, there must not be an inspired text. But is this premise necessary? Does the evidence of the manuscripts, the process of copying over those 2000 years, and indeed the differences in printed editions of the Greek New Testament over the last 500 years make it impossible to confess the inspiration of the Scriptures?

In a response to Whitby and other critics of Mills work, Richard Bentley, a Cambridge theologian and scholar, defended the authority of the text:

For if we are to believe not only this wise Author [Collins] but a wiser Doctor of your own [Whitby], He [Mill] was *labouring* all that while *to prove the text precarious*: having scrap'd together such an immense Collection of *Various Readings*...For what is it, that your Whitbyus so inveighs and exclaims at? The Doctor's Labours, says he, make the whole text precarious; and expose both the Reformation to the *Papists* and Religion itself to the *Atheists*. God forbid! We'll still hope better things. For surely those *Various Readings* existed before in the several Exemplars [manuscripts]; Dr Mill did not make and coin them, he only exhibited them to our View. If Religion therefore was true before, though such Various Readings were in being: it will be as true and consequently as safe still, though every body sees them. Depend on't; no Truth, no matter of Fact fairly laid open, can ever subvert True Religion.<sup>15</sup>

Two key points are made by Bentley. First, he sees no need to grant the point that the 30,000 differences that Mill counted up between the manuscripts and the printed *Textus Receptus* constituted a basis for falsifying the confession of the inspiration of Scripture. The differences in the manuscripts existed long before Mill or Whitby, and yet the church was able to view the Scriptures as inspired all along. This is a key argument. Ehrman is aware of this point—indeed he cites a portion of the quotation given above<sup>16</sup>—yet he does not refute it. Ehrman even notes that

the thirty thousand variants uncovered by Mill do not detract from the integrity of the New Testament; they simply provide the data that scholars need to work on the established text, a text that is more amply documented than any from the ancient world.<sup>17</sup>

Yet Ehrman still insists, like both Whitby and Hills, that one must have a perfectly transmitted text in order to accept the inspiration of Scripture. Reflecting back on the pre-critical faith that he had as a young man, Ehrman writes “Given the circumstance that he [God] didn't preserve the words, the conclusion seemed inescapable to me that he hadn't

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<sup>15</sup> Bentley wrote this piece in 1713 under a pseudonym: Phileleutherus Lipsiensis. Cited from *Remarks upon a Late Discourse of Free Thinking*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (London: W. Thurbourn,, 1725), 61-62. Emphasis original.

<sup>16</sup> Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 87.

<sup>17</sup> Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 87.

gone to the trouble of inspiring them.”<sup>18</sup> Yet the rest of the conclusion to this book does not deal with manuscripts or variant readings or original texts. Instead, the focus is on classic historical-critical argumentation to deny any divine source for the biblical writings, and that any copying or reading of a text involves interpretation. And since interpretations are all personal and individual there can be no divine authority: “meaning is not inherent and texts do not speak for themselves...But interpretations of texts abound, and people in fact do *not* agree on what the texts mean. This is obviously true of the texts of Scripture.”<sup>19</sup> This is the same argument made by Richard Simon, the Roman Catholic (see note 7), who argued that the Scriptures could not be authoritative in and of themselves but needed the authority of the church—indeed the Roman Church, to guarantee truth.

But must we grant the empiricist point that a demonstration of divine providence is required in order to accept that the NT writings are inspired? I believe that Bentley’s two-fold argument is invaluable: First, the New Testament is inspired despite the differences in the manuscripts. The early church knew this; they had in front of them the very manuscripts with different readings in different places. Yet they still considered the NT to be inspired. Bentley’s second point is that any true matter, fairly presented (and “fairly presented” is key) “can ever subvert true religion.” In other words, a fair understanding and handling of the evidence—in this case, of the manuscripts and of their transmission—will not subvert the revealed truth of the Scriptures.

I note Bentley’s two-fold defense first because I find it helpful and second because it is remarkably consistent with the argument made by Missouri Synod theologian Franz Pieper some 200 years later. I will return to Pieper’s treatment of the topic at the end of this paper.

### **The Authority of the Scriptures: An Early Church Perspective on the Manuscripts**

In order to “fairly present” the matter, some background on the transmission of the NT text is necessary. For the first 1500 years of the church, there was no single “text,” only tens of thousands of manuscripts. Individual copies, produced by hand, of the gospels, the Pauline epistles, and the Catholic Epistles. Some 6000 of them in Greek alone produced before Gutenberg; some 600 from prior to the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Some very large, and some today only scraps ravaged by time. But all of them produced by individuals in the church. All of them produced with the confession that the Holy Spirit spoke by the prophets. The challenge for us is that no one of them is identical to any other. And none of them is the original manuscript for any writing of the NT.

Is this a problem or not? In one sense none of this matters at all. We can read our Bibles in clear, readable translations, hear sermons preached from them, and not worry one bit about manuscripts and differences among them. I would hope that we all fall into this category, at least in the vast majority of times that we approach the Scriptures. For others, especially those who have had the privilege of being instructed in Greek, there is a desire to understand and define as precisely as possible the meaning of the text—including the differences in meaning that are presented by the different manuscripts. Our respect for the Scriptures as authoritative and normative *require*, I believe, the most careful study that

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<sup>18</sup> Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 211.

<sup>19</sup> Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 216.

we are able to devote to it. But for others, the manuscripts have been turned into a reason to dispute the integrity and inspiration (actually, the authority) of the NT.

At the outset we must understand that a manuscript is a hand-produced object. Looking at two manuscripts is similar to looking at two hand-sewn quilts made in the same pattern by the same person. They may look identical from a distance. But when viewed up close there will inevitably be unique differences in stitching, the precise size of the blocks, etc. No two quilts will ever be completely identical. Indeed these differences and unique features are what make them so valuable—all the more so if the quilter is your mother or grandmother or a dear friend.

Both authors and scribes in the ancient world understood full well that the texts that they were producing and copying would, sooner or later, be changed. Because there was no copyright law, once a text was in hand anyone could produce a copy, sell it, and the author would have no control over its further copying or sale. Furthermore, the author would have no control over the wording of the text—changes could be made in subsequent copies, which neither the author could control nor the buyer have any knowledge that he was commissioning or purchasing a corrupted copy. There were several ways that authors would try to minimize this problem. Some would insert warnings of various kinds to copyists, others would write into their text—even into poems—the names and locations of the book seller to whom the author had entrusted a master copy.<sup>20</sup>

But changes in subsequent copies were inevitable. A remarkable example is a collection of the writings of Aristotle:

It seems that Aristotle edited his own writings and authorized master copies for publication. Two hundred and fifty years after Aristotle's death, books surfaced in Rome that showed additions by Aristotle's hand in the margins...They were Aristotle's personal copies, from which he very likely read during his lectures, noting ideas in an abbreviated format that was difficult for anyone but the author to understand. The Roman publishers struggled to edit these books for publication, and in the end they produced a text full of repetitions and discrepancies. Nevertheless, these editions sold so well that they completely replaced the older versions, which had been edited by Aristotle himself.<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, scribes also were aware of their shortcomings. A frequent prayer written by copyists at the end of Greek manuscripts of the NT from the late medieval period reads: "O reader, in spiritual love forgive me, and pardon the daring of him who wrote, and turn his errors into some mystic good." These scribes, whose work shows them to be fully trained and highly competent, nevertheless knew that they had made mistakes – that it was an act of daring to make a copy. But note also their prayer that even their mistakes might still be used by God for His purposes.

The early theologians of the church were likewise fully aware of the realities of working with manuscripts. For they had in front of them hand-made copies of the NT

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<sup>20</sup> David Trobisch, "The New Testament in Light of Book Publishing in Antiquity," in *Editing the Bible. Assessing the Task Past and Present*, ed. John S. Kloppenborg and Judith A. Newman (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 162–65.

<sup>21</sup> Trobisch, "The New Testament in Light of Book Publishing in Antiquity," 164.

writings, and they themselves as authors were aware of what it meant to have copies of their own works produced by scribes, and the inevitable alterations and confusions that would occur. Many early theologians comment upon the differences that they find in the biblical manuscripts. For example, Jerome (IV/V cen.) was one of the greatest language scholars of the early church, who translated the Old Testament from Hebrew and (at least) the Gospels from Greek into Latin. He received a question regarding the differences in chronology between the gospel accounts regarding the time of Jesus' resurrection. He offers two possible explanations:

This problem has a twofold solution. Either we do not accept the testimony of Mark, because this final portion is not contained in most of the Gospels that bear his name – almost all the Greek codices lacking it – or else must affirm that Matthew and Mark have both told the truth, that our Lord rose on the evening of the Sabbath, and that He was seen by Mary Magdalene in the morning of the first day of the following week. (Epistle 120, *To Hedibia*)

Jerome is commenting on the Latin version, and thus he notes that the longer ending of Mark is in some Latin manuscripts but is missing “in almost all the Greek codices” (manuscripts). The attestation of the “longer ending,” which causes the perceived chronological discrepancy with Matthew, is much different today. Among the Greek manuscripts of Mark that survive, only three manuscripts lack the ending (two of which happen to be the oldest available for that portion of Mark). This reminds us that the manuscripts that survive are not a complete record of the textual tradition; many manuscripts, in particular the earliest, from the period before and during the great persecutions of the church (in 250, 257, and 303-311 AD) have been destroyed or are lost.

Jerome, however, does not feel compelled to make a final determination about which is the original reading. He notes the differences in the manuscripts and then offers interpretations based on both possibilities. He assumes that even the longer reading, the one missing from the Greek manuscripts must have “told the truth.” Significantly, he does not seem to feel compelled to determine “the” original reading and discard the other; he can view both readings as true.

This may seem odd to us; we more often operate with notions of one reading being “right”—which necessarily makes the other reading “wrong.” At times the early fathers did the same, to be sure. They were fully capable of rendering a judgment on which of two readings came from the apostles. But they were also able, in many cases, to allow both readings to stand, and to offer interpretations of both. For example, Origen’s commentary on Romans discusses the significant differences in the manuscripts at Romans 5:14. Most manuscripts read: “However, death reigned from Adam up to Moses, even upon those who did not (μή) sin after the likeness of the transgression of Adam.” Some manuscripts, both Greek and Latin, omit the “not,” thereby completely changing the meaning of that clause. Origen first offers lengthy commentary on the shorter text, without the “not.” Then he notes also that “If, on the other hand, as it reads in some manuscripts...” and then offers a second exposition of the text based on the reading “not.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> The most comprehensive study of the discussion of textual variants in the church fathers is found in Amy M. Donaldson, “Explicit References to New Testament Variant Readings Among Greek and Latin Church Fathers,”



The manuscripts themselves seem to reflect this desire to preserve previous readings. Several early manuscripts, dated to as early as 200, show evidence of being an edited text, with at least two predecessors compared and at times combined. Other manuscripts show significant later correction and addition, with alternative readings in the margins or written in between lines of text. Sometimes these are indeed corrections; at other times they seem to be a genuine alternatives. Of course, because these scribes did not leave notations about what they were attempting to do with one alteration or another we should not be eager to attempt to assign a motive to their actions. But the fact that the texts of the New Testament writings tended to become slightly longer and fuller as they were copied through the centuries seems to support the idea that there is an effort at preservation, even of conflicting readings.

The early fathers also seem to be operating with a concern that nothing of the text becomes lost. Their concern is that readings which had been used by others in the church should not simply be discarded, at least not without ample reason. This was at least in part due to the uncertainty of the process of copying a manuscript. They themselves were aware of the mistakes and changes that would occur. But they also seem to be concerned to not lose anything that may have been taught by the Apostles and may carry the truth.

This humility before the text is summarized well by Augustine, in a letter to Jerome:

“I have learned to yield respect and honor only to the books of Scripture: of these alone do I most firmly believe that the authors were completely free from error. And if in these writings I am perplexed by anything which appears to me opposed to the truth, I do not hesitate to suppose that either the manuscript is faulty, or the translator has not caught the meaning of what was said, or I myself have failed to understand it.” (Letter 82 to Jerome, AD 405)

Notice the unblushing confidence in the authority of the Scriptures, yet at the same time a deep humility with respect to his own abilities. The text must be right; if it *seems* not to be right, it is the fault of the manuscript (and then should be corrected<sup>23</sup>). If the fault is not with the copyist, then the fault may well lie with the translator (Augustine is working in Latin). If the fault is neither with the manuscript or the translator, then the fault must lie in his own lack of insight and understanding. The text is always right.

Bentley’s first observation, made in 1713, seems to be a helpful solution to the perceived “problem” of the differences in the manuscripts: the differences do not diminish the truth and authority of the text. The early fathers worked with this understanding: The manuscripts, even when there is variation, can be considered true—and indeed have the authority of inspired writings.

## **The Reliability of the Text: A Matter of Fact Fairly Laid Open**

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(Ph.D. diss., Notre Dame, 2009). Her discussion of Origen’s comments on multiple readings is found on pp. 99–100.

<sup>23</sup> “But inaccuracy must be excluded, for the attention of those who wish to know the divine scripture must first focus on the task of correcting the manuscripts, so that uncorrected ones give way to corrected ones.” *De doctrina christiana* II.14.21. Translation from R. P. H. Green, *St. Augustine. On Christian Teaching* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

Bentley's second observation also merits expansion: that no true matter, fairly presented "can ever subvert true religion." A recognition that the text has been copied and transmitted, even at times miscopied and altered, does not destroy its authority. And in fact I would contend that careful study of the details and indeed messiness of the manuscripts of the New Testament can actually make us more confident in the tenacity and accuracy of the wording of the text, rather than less confident.

There is something of a fine line that we must walk here. It is common in discussions of the issue of the stability of the text to make assertions like "97% of the text is certain." That is true, based on comparisons of all printed editions for the last 500 years; indeed, they agree on the precise wording a very significant amount of time. But at the same time, we should not be satisfied with 97%, as if it is "good enough" and it is not worth our effort and attention to become certain about that other 3% of the text.

Another common assertion is that "no doctrine is affected by the variants." Again, this is true, but not because every important passage is without variation. Rather, it is because of our hermeneutical approach to the biblical text, which allows "Scripture to interpret Scripture. Does John 1:18, for example, call Jesus:

- "God the one and only" (NIV 1973) = μονογενής θεός
- "the only begotten Son" (KJV) = ὁ μονογενής υἱός<sup>24</sup>
- "the only God, who is" (ESV) may be translating μονογενής θεός, but this more accurately renders a third reading in the manuscripts: ὁ μονογενής θεός
- A fourth reading not present in an English translation is "except the only begotten Son" = εἰ μὴ ὁ μονογενής υἱός

Which reading is "original"? Manuscripts, editions, and translations do not agree. The modern editions of the Greek text and modern translations tend favor μονογενής θεός. Is "doctrine" affected? It most certainly is—whether Jesus is "God" or "Son" is a significant question. And it is a textual problem that merits further study. Nevertheless, the *Gospel according to John* itself testifies—in passages with no textual variation—that Jesus is both "God" (John 1:1) and the "Son of God" (John 1:14; 3:16, 18). If a question about the divinity of Jesus came up, we should first turn to those certain, undoubted passages, and secondarily to John 1:18. As students of the word of God, who insist that theology be done on the basis of the original languages, we must ask questions about a single word, even a single letter (in this case the Greek article ὁ) because it will impact the meaning of the text.

Furthermore, there are passages where indeed "doctrinal" matters are impacted. The most significant passage is certainly 1 John 5:7b-8a: "And there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one." Were this passage part of the canonical text it would be the clearest teaching of the unity of the persons of the Trinity. The passage was not found in the Greek manuscripts used for the first printed edition of the Greek New Testament in 1516, nor in the second edition of 1518. The latter was used by Luther as the basis for his 1522 translation of the New Testament,

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<sup>24</sup> The NIV 2011 has, inexplicably, "the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father." There is no Greek basis for "the one and only Son, who is himself God."

and so he did not include this passage.<sup>25</sup> The Latin Vulgate, however, had included these verses and they had long been used as a “proof passage” for the doctrine of the Trinity. Later editions of the Greek New Testament did include these words, and so the King James translation of 1611 includes the passage. The manuscript and patristic attestation for the longer reading is very weak. Luther was quite aware of the problem, and in his 1527 lectures on 1 John, which were based on the Latin Vulgate text, he comments specifically on the problem:

The Greek books do not have these words, but this verse seems to have been inserted by the Catholics because of the Arians, yet not aptly; for wherever John speaks about the witnesses, he speaks about those on earth, not about those in heaven.<sup>26</sup>

This is rather sophisticated argumentation, noting the history of the church that may have impacted the text, the possibility of intentional alteration, and analysis of the author’s style and language. Much the same argumentation is found in technical commentaries still today. Luther had no difficulty removing a passage from the text when the evidence warranted it, a lesson that should be learned as we study other passages as well. Significantly, unlike previous translations, the ESV is so confident that this passage is a secondary addition that it does even include a footnote referencing the missing text. But it must be emphasized that examples of the size and scale of 1 John 5:7-8 are very rare. John 7:53b-8:11 is another difficult problem, along with deciding among the four or five different endings of Mark.

A third common argument is that the numbers of manuscripts is massive, and far great and earlier than any other ancient text. Indeed, this stands true; there are about 6000 identified Greek manuscripts of the New Testament writings. However, the earliest of these are generally quite small and fragmentary. In many cases the “manuscripts” prior to the fourth century are just a few lines. And for some portions of text the earliest manuscript that we have dates to the fourth century (such as Mark 16, noted above). In addition, the bulk of these manuscripts contain only the gospels and date to after the 10<sup>th</sup> century. So even this argument is not as decisive in its support for the veracity of the text as it may appear.

Furthermore, the great number of manuscripts actually creates the problem. Were there only one manuscript there would be no variants. The more manuscripts that are found, the greater are the number of differences between them. In particular, the earlier the manuscript the more likely there are to be differences from other manuscripts. So there is both a confirming of the stability of the text, but also at the same time a further addition of differences. We therefore must not shrink from close, careful study of the manuscripts, for there is still work to be done.

Bentley’s second observation, that no true matter, fairly presented “can ever subvert true religion” can also be used constructively, repaying close reading of the manuscripts.

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<sup>25</sup> 1 John 5:7 began to be added to editions of Luther’s Bible produced after his death, though no edition produced during his lifetime included it. Other passages not found in Luther’s translation but present in the KJV include: Mark 11:26: “But if ye do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses.” (KJV = Matt 6:15); Luke 17:36: “Two men shall be in the field; the one shall be taken, and the other left.” (KJV = Matt 24:40).

<sup>26</sup> *Luther’s Works*, vol. 30 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 318.

This will reveal specific facts about the manuscripts and the process of transmission that cohere well with our understanding of inspiration and the assumption of a sufficient and reliable text.

First, in contrast to the popular notion, the manuscripts of the New Testament books are very consistent. The differences tend to be quite small and have almost no impact on translation and meaning. I have provided in an appendix two passages that are central to the teaching of justification by faith: Romans 3:21-28 and Galatians 2:15-21. I will not go through each example here, but I have provided every known alternative reading from all known manuscripts for your review. Even if every alternative reading were adopted, these passages would still quite clearly teach justification by faith.

Second, while there is a perception that the manuscripts are very distant and wildly different from the copies that were sent out by the Apostles, close study of textual features suggest otherwise. At least for some of the books there are passages that indicate that our manuscript tradition reaches back to the copies of letters received by the individual churches.

For example, our manuscripts retain wording that would have been found in the document originally received by the intended audience, but would have been of no meaning or significance to later users. Paul frequently ends his letters with an authenticating statement:

- 1 Cor 16:21: “I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand.”
- Gal 6:11: “See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand.”
- Col 4:18: “I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand.”
- 2 Thes 3:17: “I Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the sign of genuineness in every letter of mine; it is the way I write.”<sup>27</sup>
- Phlm 19: “I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it.”

The phrase “with my own hand” (τῇ ἐμῇ χειρὶ) is a common formula used when a letter writer employs a secretary to compose the letter; the Latin equivalent, *mea manu*, is common, for example, in Cicero’s letters.<sup>28</sup> The original recipients would have been able to see, physically in the document itself, the point at which the author begins writing “with his own hand.” From that point the appearance of the handwriting would have changed from that of the secretary to that of the author, in this case, Paul. What follows in each of these letters are a few personal greetings and a brief benediction. Galatians has the lengthiest authorial hand section, which contains a summary of the argument of the entire letter.

These authorial marks are significant for the purpose of understanding the history of the transmission of the text of the Pauline letters. They indicate textual markers that would have been in the original letter itself, the one received by the church to which it was addressed. These textual markers were retained in the manuscripts that we have today, even though their original purpose can no longer be expressed – for example, no translation shifts to a different font when it gets to 1 Cor 16:21 or any of these other passages. These textual markers are quite significant for tracing the history of the Pauline

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<sup>27</sup> Note that the translation “sign of genuineness” is an interpretive gloss in the ESV; the Greek reads simply σημεῖον = “sign.”

<sup>28</sup> E. Randolph Richards, *The Secretary in the Letters of Paul* (WUNT 2, 42; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1991), 69.

letters prior to their collection into the New Testament. They give us tangible evidence that, at the very least for these five letters, the unknown compilers of the Pauline letters that became part of the New Testament had access to the letters as received by the churches, and that they have not been re-edited to remove these personal marks.

The numerous personal references in the letters are additional evidence that they were not substantially revised as they were gathered into the canon. These include circumstances and personal names that would likely not have had meaning or significance outside of the immediate communication between Paul and the churches. For example, In Philippians 4 Paul entreats Euodia and entreats Syntyche (the verb is repeated, likely for emphasis) to “agree in the Lord” (Phil 4:2). The nature of their disagreement is not specified, and these women are nowhere else mentioned in the NT. So it seems unlikely that anyone outside of the church at Philippi knew the women or knew what the disagreement was about. Yet both the names and the encouragement to unity stand in the text, untouched by later editors or copyists.

Similar personal notes that would have had no significance outside the initial audience include requests for personal items (2 Tim 4:13) and the offering of personal advice (1 Tim 5:23). One scholar notes that these kinds of remarks may have been signals—indeed intentional signals—to the early readers of copies of the letters; they would have authenticated that the text has not been stripped of even the most mundane matters.<sup>29</sup> These passages are of no theological significance; I suspect that you have never heard a sermon preached on any of these passages. Yet perhaps ironically these may have been most significant to first and second century readers of the text, even if they are not to us, for they would have confirmed to them that the copies in their hands went back to the original copy received by the church.

The features of the texts and of the manuscripts, may not “prove” that we have copies that are direct copies of the original writings. After all, a manuscript from 200 AD may sound quite old to us but is nevertheless some 150 years after Paul wrote his letters. Nevertheless, there are no grounds for the radical skepticism often expressed regarding the manuscripts, and a good deal of evidence that we can be confident that our text is reliable.

Third, the discoveries of early fragments of manuscripts in recent years have confirmed the stability of the text. While the news media obsesses over items like the so-called “Gospel of Jesus’ Wife” because they upend historic belief, discoveries that confirm what we already have are left announced. An example of just such a “non-event” in popularized biblical scholarship is the recovery of a fragment of 1 Corinthians in 2008. The fragment is small, only portions of fourteen lines of text from 1 Corinthians 14:31-34 and 15:3-16, all told perhaps 150 letters are legible. But this fragmentary manuscript is dated to the fourth century. The only manuscripts of this portion of 1 Corinthians that are earlier are  $\mathfrak{P}^{46}$ , dated to the early third century, which is well preserved and contains about 90% of the text of 1 Corinthians, and perhaps the famous fourth century manuscripts Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus. So it is among the earliest manuscript evidence for this portion of 1 Corinthians, a passage that has become hotly disputed in the last forty years.

Verses 34 and 35 and 1 Corinthians 14, important for the teaching of the role of women in the church, are found in every manuscript ever recovered of 1 Corinthians. Those two verses are found not after verse 33 but after verse 40, however, in a handful of

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<sup>29</sup> Trobisch, “The New Testament in the Light of Book Publishing in Antiquity,” 165–66.

Greek and Latin manuscripts, all of which are closely related to each other. Despite being found in every manuscript, some scholars, uncomfortable with the message of those verses, have argued that those two verses, 34-35, “Let the women be silent in the churches,” were not part of the original text of 1 Corinthians. This argument is technically called a “conjecture” because the argument has no textual evidence to support—no manuscript or church father omits the verses, it is only an argument made by an interpreter based on his or her interpretation of the passage. Nevertheless, the conjecture to omit these two verses has received widespread support among those who argue for an “egalitarian” approach to the role of women in the church—who advocate for the acceptance of women in all roles in the worship and life of the church. Indeed, it is difficult to separate ideological perspectives from actual textual study in this question.

Nevertheless, this recently discovered fragment of 1 Corinthians contains 14:34-35 exactly where they are found in the traditional text. Furthermore, the minor differences found in this manuscript match up exactly with an important cluster of other known manuscripts. This manuscript therefore confirms what we already knew, and consequently you heard nothing about it. But I am certain that had this fragment *not* included 14:34-35, its discovery would have been widely reported and calls would have been made for wholesale changes to the church’s teaching and practice. Again, this does not “prove” inspiration, but this evidence coheres with our confidence in a reliably transmitted text that can be traced back to the apostles. This supports our creedal teaching of inspiration by the Spirit.

### **A Sufficiently Reliable Text**

The Holy Spirit “spoke by the prophets.” We can learn from our fathers in the faith to view the canonical text, as we have it, as inspired. Its inspiration was not called into question by the differences in the manuscripts.

The issues raised by study of the manuscripts and the history of the text of the New Testament are not resolved by simplistic answers which ignore evidence. Detailed, patient, painstaking work is necessary. But it is the Scriptures of which we speak; it is a desire to teach and preach precisely God’s Word, and nothing else, that the expenditure of our time and attention is necessary. Because the Lutheran church relies on Scripture and not church tradition to establish truth, any changes to the biblical text made as the text was handed down in the church must be identified and resolved. We do not want to teach the things of man as if they are of God. Perhaps this is where some of the discomfort regarding textual criticism arises: Neither our study, nor the erudition of any scholar, can *establish* the authority of the text – the words are authoritative because they are from God. But discerning study of the manuscripts can call into question, based on actual evidence from within the manuscripts and the use (or lack of) in the church, whether some passages *should retain that authority*. 1 John 5:7-8b, John 7:53-8:11, and Mark 16:9-20 are examples where not only scholars but also the ancient church and the manuscripts themselves have cast into doubt whether those words go back to the apostles. The teachings contained in those passages are found elsewhere in Scripture, but well-intentioned editors of the text may indeed have added the words themselves.

On the other hand, study of the manuscripts can disprove spurious argumentation for or against certain readings. For example, the claim that John 21 is a secondary addition

to the text is not supported on the basis of evidence. Or that 1 Cor 11:2-14 is a later addition. Or the same for 1 Corinthians 14:34-35. This does not *make* the passages authoritative. They are authoritative because they are inspired. But it does confirm that the church has had sound reasons for viewing them as authoritative. Not all people who work with the manuscripts are heretics, and not all discussion of textual variation is heresy.

The question of inspiration and the integrity of the biblical text was taken up in the long-standard dogmatics text in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, Franz Pieper’s *Christian Dogmatics*. Pieper has what I believe is a helpful approach to these questions, which corresponds closely to Bentley’s arguments. Four points in particular are helpful. First, he acknowledges the complications involved in the copying of manuscripts, including (perhaps surprisingly) “dogmatic” alterations.<sup>30</sup> Second, Pieper notes that “We, too, in our theological seminary at St. Louis introduce our students to modern textual criticism. That is part of the complete external equipment of a theologian of our day.”<sup>31</sup> It is necessary for those who work with the original languages to be able to assess the different editions and readings. Third, he is able to acknowledge that both modern critical and older pre-critical editions of the Greek New Testament are reliable and authoritative. One is not required to have a final and perfectly reconstructed wording in order to have “the knowledge of the divine truth.”<sup>32</sup> And fourth, Pieper has a helpful hermeneutical approach that recognizes that even though some passages and words might be called into question, nevertheless other passages are firm and certain—without variants—where the same doctrine is taught: “Now, if because of a variant we must relinquish a certain proof-text for a certain doctrine—which, by the way, is seldom the case—we have ample proof for that doctrine in other passages which have not been touched by textual criticism.”<sup>33</sup> This is a key point, and this statement, made nearly one hundred years ago, remains true today even with the significant discoveries of manuscripts, multiple printed editions, and changes in methodology that have occurred since then.

The editions that we have and the translations—those genuinely meriting the label “translation”—are the inspired Word of God. Read your Bible because it is God’s Word. The church has always been able to trust the manuscripts and editions that it has, while always seeking to know the text more fully and accurately. And we can continue to do so today, despite the shrill rhetoric and the misinformation about the reliability of the text. As Pieper concludes: “What the Church lacks in our day is not a reliable text of the Bible, but faith in the sufficiently reliable text.”<sup>34</sup>

To summarize:

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<sup>30</sup> Pieper cites a passage from L. Schulze at length as a description of what “endangered the transmission of the original text,” including accidental copyist errors, “intentional” variants (including those made “to guard against (dogmatic) misconceptions, or to correct statements held to be erroneous, or to harmonize passages by additions from oral tradition,” marginal glosses which were incorporated into later copies, and alterations in Greek based on familiar vernacular translations. Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 1, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 339.

<sup>31</sup> Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 1, 240.

<sup>32</sup> Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 1, 340.

<sup>33</sup> Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 1, 241.

<sup>34</sup> Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 1, 340.

- 1) The view that the Bible has been significantly changed and altered has become embedded in our western pop-culture environment. This challenges the confession that the Scriptures are inspired.
- 2) Inspiration is not “provable” as an empirically demonstrable event. Nevertheless, the argument that the differences among the manuscripts invalidates their authority can be shown to be a false deduction because:
  - a. The church has always been aware of the differences in the manuscripts, and nevertheless confessed them as inspired and has been able to teach faithfully from them, regardless of which manuscript or printed edition was in use.
  - b. The Scriptures are consistent within themselves; the passages where there are differences in readings that affect meaning are able to be compared with other passages that teach the same thing but are not affected by the differences.
  - c. The numbers of manuscripts and the consistency of their readings belie the argument that there wild and significant alterations to the text were common. This area in particular is not (in Bentley’s words) “fairly presented” by opponents of Christianity.
  - d. The NT manuscripts in particular show evidence that they retain features that were of significance only to the original audience and setting, thereby demonstrating strong links back to the original copies.
  - e. Recent discoveries have pushed the evidence for the NT text back earlier and earlier; the pattern of readings found in these manuscripts confirm and sharpen recent reconstructions of the text. These have not been highlighted in popular reports.
- 3) Very close study of the individual words of the text will continue to result in some changes in wording. But we can rely both on the promises of Christ and the witness of the manuscripts themselves that the text is sufficiently firm for faithful teaching and life in Christ.

In the end, we either trust the promises of Christ, or we do not. “Surely I will be with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt 28:20); “But when the Comforter comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, he will testify to me” (John 15:26). The presence of Christ, until he comes again, is in his Word spoken, preached, and working through water and with the eating and drinking. We cannot *make* the Scriptures authoritative, we cannot prove them to be authoritative; any foundation or method which depends on our interpretation or reconstruction is, by definition, self-referential, self-serving, and ultimately uncertain. Only one based on Christ and his promises, which we know through his Word, is certain. As our Lord himself says: “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me.” And so, with the promise of his authority, we baptize and teach all nations “to obey all that I have commanded you,” for he is with us, in his Word, “to the end of the age” (Matt 28:19-20).<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> “[W]hen Christ instructs not only the apostles, but His Church (Matt. 28:20) to teach all things (πάντα) whatsoever He has commanded them, He gives the Church the guarantee that His doctrine in all its parts will be clearly and surely known to it to the end of time.” Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 1, 238.



**Appendix: All Known Alternative Readings in the Manuscripts  
Rom 3:21-28 and Gal 2:15-21**

*Words in italics identify places where the manuscripts differ*

Romans 3:21-28

But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been revealed, having been testified in the Law and the Prophets; 22 the righteousness of God is revealed through faith in *Jesus Christ* for all *and upon all* who believe. For there is no distinction: 23 for all have sinned and lack the glory of God, 24 having been justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, *through this faith*, as a demonstration of his righteousness, by, in the forbearance of God, passing over earlier sins as a demonstration of his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just *and the one who justified / by justifying* the one who has faith in Jesus. 27 Where, then, is *your* boasting? It is excluded. By which law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. 28 *For we determine / let us determine* that one is justified *by / through* faith apart from works of law.

3:22 through faith in Jesus Christ  
through faith in Christ

3:22 for all who believe  
for all and upon all who believe

3:25 through faith  
through this faith (?)  
*omit* (one manuscript)

3:26 the one who justified  
by justifying (two mss,)

3:27 boasting  
your boasting (two mss, Latin)

3:28 for  
[another word for “for”]

3:28 we determine  
let us determine (late mss.)

3:28 by faith  
through faith

Galatians 2:15-21

15 We are by nature Jews and not sinners from among the Gentiles. 16 *But* because we know that a person is not justified by works of law—[a person is not justified] except through faith in *Jesus Christ / Christ Jesus*—we also believed in *Christ Jesus / Jesus Christ*, in order that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of law, because no one will be justified by works of law. 17 But if while seeking to be justified in Christ we ourselves are shown to be sinners, is Christ then a promoter of sin? Certainly not. 18 For if what I tore down these things I again build up, then I make myself a promoter of sin. 19 For I, through the law, died to the law in order that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ. 20 It is no longer I who lives, but Christ lives in me. What I live now in the flesh I live by faith in *the Son of God / God and Christ*, who loved me and gave himself for me. 21 I do not nullify the grace of God; for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died uselessly.

2:15 But  
*omit*

2:16 Jesus Christ  
Christ Jesus

2:16 Christ Jesus  
Jesus Christ

2:16 because (ὅτι)  
[another word for “because”] (διότι)

2:17 Interrogative particle (ἄρα - question mark)  
Inferential particle (ἄρα - no question mark)  
(note – accents not used until fourth century)

2:20 Son of God  
God and Christ