

Preserved Text-v7. Were Early Christians Careful?

Here I am again in the name of the Sovereign Creator of heaven and earth, the Lord Jesus Christ. Continuing with the historical evidence for Preservation, I will discuss whether early Christians exercised care with the New Testament writings.

It has been widely affirmed that the early Christians were either unconcerned or unable to watch over the purity of the text. Again a review of the premises is called for. Many of the first believers had been devout Jews who had an ingrained reverence and care for the Old Testament Scriptures which extended to the very jots and tittles. This reverence and care would naturally be extended to the New Testament Scriptures.

Why should modern critics assume that the early Christians, in particular the spiritual leaders among them, were inferior in integrity or intelligence? A leader's quoting from memory, or tailoring a passage to suit his purpose in sermon or letter, by no means implies that he would take similar liberties when transcribing a book or corpus. Ordinary honesty would require him to produce a faithful copy. Are we to assume that everyone who made copies of New Testament books in those early years was a knave, or a fool? Paul was certainly as intelligent a man as any of us. If Hebrews was written by someone else, here was another man of high spiritual insight and intellectual power. There was Barnabas and Apollos and Clement and Polycarp, etc., etc. The Church has had men of reason and intelligence all down through the years. Starting out with what they **knew** to be the pure text, the earliest leaders did not need to be textual critics. They had only to be reasonably honest and careful. But is there not good reason to believe they would be **especially** watchful and careful?

The apostles

Not only did the apostles themselves declare the New Testament writings to be Scripture, which would elicit reverence and care in their treatment, they expressly warned the believers to be on their guard against false teachers. Consider Acts 20:28-31. "So take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has placed you as overseers, to shepherd the congregation of the Lord and God¹ which He purchased with His own blood. Because I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Yes, men will rise up from among you

¹ The sheep belong to the Lord, not to the elders. Some 7% of the Greek manuscripts omit 'the Lord and', as in most versions. "The Lord and God" refers to Jesus.

yourselves, speaking distorted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert.” Could Paul be any clearer?

Now consider Galatians 1:6-9. “I am sadly surprised that you are turning away so quickly from the one who called you by the grace of Christ, to a different gospel—it is not a mere variation, but certain people are unsettling you and wanting to distort the Gospel of the Christ. Now even if we, or an angel out of heaven, should preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed! As we have just said, I here emphatically repeat: If anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed!!”¹ Could Paul be any more emphatic? Note that Paul is claiming to be competent to define the only true Gospel of Christ, and he could only do so genuinely by divine inspiration.

Now consider 2 Peter 2:1-2. “However, there were also false prophets among the people, just as, indeed, there will be false teachers among you, who will introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Owner who bought them (bringing on themselves swift destruction). And many will follow their licentious ways, because of which the way of the Truth will be defamed.” Peter warned the believers to be on their guard against false teachers.

And then there is 2 John 7, 9-11. “Now many deceivers have come into the world,² who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in flesh³—this is the deceiver, even the Antichrist!” “Anyone who turns aside and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; but whoever continues in Christ’s teaching does have both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house; do not even tell him, “I wish you well”, because whoever tells him, “I wish you well”, participates in his malignant works.”⁴ Some might feel that John’s language is a little strong, but he was definitely warning them. Going back to verse 7, The Text has “coming”, not ‘having come’, so evidently John is

¹ ‘Other gospels’ would seem to be in plentiful supply; those who promote them are under a curse.

² Some 82% of the Greek manuscripts have “come into” rather than ‘go out into’ (as in most versions). The 18% presumably have the deceivers going out from the church into the world, but that is not John’s point. The deceivers have been introduced into the world by Satan, the original and boss deceiver.

³ Recall the word of the angels in Acts 1:11, “This very Jesus who is being taken up from you into the sky, He will come again in the precise manner that you observed Him going into the sky.” The angels are emphatic; the return is going to be just like the departure. I take it that the Lord will return with the same glorified human body, visibly, come out of a cloud, and His feet will touch down at the same spot where they left (see Matthew 24:30, “coming on the clouds”, and Zechariah 14:4, “His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives”).

⁴ People who do not believe and teach what Christ taught are on the other side. To be malignant is to be aggressively evil. Obviously, we should avoid anything that might be interpreted as identification with such people.

referring to Christ's second coming, which will certainly be "in flesh". Recall the word of the angels in Acts 1:11.

Peter's statement concerning the "twisting" that Paul's words were receiving (2 Peter 3:16) suggests that there was awareness and concern as to the text and the way it was being handled. I recognize that the Apostles were focusing on the interpretation rather than the copying of the text, and yet, since any alteration of the text may result in a different interpretation we may reasonably infer that their concern for the truth would include the faithful transmission of the text.

Indeed, we could scarcely ask for a clearer expression of this concern than that given in Revelation 22:18-19. "I myself testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If any one adds to them, may God add to him the seven plagues written in this book! And if anyone takes away from the words¹ of the book of this prophecy, may God remove his share from the tree of life and out of the Holy City, that stand written in this book!" Since it is the glorified Christ who is speaking, would not any true follower of His pay careful attention?

Sovereign Jesus clearly expressed this protective concern early in His earthly ministry. In Matthew 5:19 we read: "whoever annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so . . ." Note, "one of the least"; the Lord's concern extends down to "the least".

The early leaders

The early leaders furnish a few helpful clues as to the state of affairs in their day. The letters of Ignatius contain several references to a considerable traffic between the churches (of Asia Minor, Greece and Rome) by way of messengers (often official), which seems to indicate a deep sense of solidarity binding them together, and a wide circulation of news and attitudes—a problem with a heretic in one place would soon be known all over, etc. That there was strong feeling about the integrity of the Scriptures is made clear by Polycarp (7:1), "Whoever perverts the sayings of the Lord . . . that one is the firstborn of Satan". Present-day critics may not like Polycarp's terminology, but for him to use such strong language makes clear that he was not merely aware and concerned; he was exercised.

¹ "Words", plural, includes the individual words that make up the whole. Those textual critics who have wantonly removed words from the Text, on the basis of satanically inspired presuppositions, are out. Those who interpret the Text in such a way as to avoid its plain meaning, likewise. Jehovah the Son affirms that the words are "true and **faithful**", and He expects us to interpret them that way.

Similarly, Justin Martyr says (*Apol.* i.58), "the wicked demons have also put forward Marcion of Pontus". Again, such strong language makes clear that he was aware and concerned. And in *Trypho* xxxv he says of heretics teaching doctrines of the spirits of error, that fact "causes us who are disciples of the true and pure doctrine of Jesus Christ to be more faithful and steadfast in the hope announced by Him."

It seems obvious that heretical activity would have precisely the effect of putting the faithful on their guard and forcing them to define in their own minds what they were going to defend. Thus Marcion's truncated canon evidently stirred the faithful to define the true canon. But Marcion also altered the wording of Luke and Paul's Epistles, and by their bitter complaints it is clear that the faithful were both aware and concerned. We may note in passing that the heretical activity also furnishes backhanded evidence that the New Testament writings were regarded as Scripture—why bother falsifying them if they had no authority?

Dionysius, Bishop of Corinth (168-176), complained that his own letters had been tampered with, and worse yet the Holy Scriptures also.

And they insisted that they had received a pure tradition. Thus Irenaeus said that the doctrine of the apostles had been handed down by the succession of bishops, being guarded and preserved, without any forging of the Scriptures, allowing neither addition nor curtailment, involving public reading without falsification (*Against Heretics* IV. 32:8).

Tertullian, also, says of his right to the New Testament Scriptures, "I hold sure title-deeds from the original owners themselves . . . I am the heir of the apostles. Just as they carefully prepared their will and testament, and committed it to a trust . . . even so I hold it."¹

Irenaeus

In order to ensure accuracy in transcription, authors would sometimes add at the close of their literary works an adjuration directed to future copyists. So, for example, Irenaeus attached to the close of his treatise *On the Ogdoad* the following note: "I adjure you who shall copy out this book, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by his glorious advent when he comes to judge the living and the dead, that you compare what you transcribe, and correct it carefully against this

¹ *Prescription against Heretics*, 37. I have used the translation done by Peter Holmes in Vol. III of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*.

manuscript from which you copy; and also that you transcribe this adjuration and insert it in the copy.”¹

If Irenaeus took such extreme precautions for the accurate transmission of his own work, how much more would he be concerned for the accurate copying of the Word of God? In fact, he demonstrates his concern for the accuracy of the text by defending the traditional reading of a **single letter**. The question is whether John the Apostle wrote $\chi\xi\zeta'$ (666) or $\chi\iota\zeta'$ (616) in Revelation 13:18. Irenaeus asserts that 666 is found "in all the most approved and ancient copies" and that "those men who saw John face to face" bear witness to it. And he warns those who made the change (of a single letter) that "there shall be no light punishment upon him who either adds or subtracts anything from the Scripture" (*Against Heretics*, xxx.1). Presumably Irenaeus is applying Revelation 22:18-19.

Considering Polycarp's intimacy with John, his personal copy of Revelation would most probably have been taken from the Autograph. And considering Irenaeus' veneration for Polycarp his personal copy of Revelation was probably taken from Polycarp's. Although Irenaeus evidently was no longer able to refer to the Autograph (not ninety years after it was written!) he was clearly in a position to identify a faithful copy and to declare with certainty the original reading—this in 186 AD, which brings us to Tertullian.

Tertullian

Around the year 208 he urged the heretics to

run over the apostolic churches, in which the very thrones of the apostles are still pre-eminent in their places, in which their own authentic writings (*authenticae*) are read, uttering the voice and representing the face of each of them severally. Achaia is very near you, (in which) you find Corinth. Since you are not far from Macedonia, you have Philippi; (and there too) you have the Thessalonians. Since you are able to cross to Asia, you get Ephesus. Since, moreover, you are close upon Italy, you have Rome, from which there comes even into our own hands the very authority (of the apostles themselves).²

Some have thought that Tertullian was claiming that Paul's Autographs were still being read in his day (208), but at the very least he must mean they were using faithful copies. Was anything else to be expected? For example, when

¹ B.M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 21.

² *Prescription against Heretics*, 36, using Holmes' translation.

the Ephesian Christians saw the Autograph of Paul's letter to them getting tattered, would they not carefully execute an identical copy for their continued use, and which would have a declaration that it had been authenticated? Would they let the Autograph perish without making such a copy? (There must have been a constant stream of people coming either to make copies of their letter or to verify the correct reading.) I believe we are obliged to conclude that in the year 200 the Ephesian Church was still in a position to attest the original wording of her letter (and so for the others)—but this is coeval with P⁴⁶, P⁶⁶ and P⁷⁵!

Both Justin Martyr and Irenaeus claimed that the Church was spread throughout the whole earth, in their day—remember that Irenaeus, in 177, became bishop of Lyons, in **Gaul**, and he was not the first bishop in that area. Coupling this information with Justin's statement that the memoirs of the apostles were read each Sunday in the assemblies, it becomes clear that there must have been thousands of copies of the New Testament writings in use by 200 AD. Each assembly would need at least one copy to read from, and there must have been private copies among those who could afford them.

We have objective historical evidence in support of the following propositions:

- The true text was never 'lost'.
- In AD 200 the exact original wording of the several books could still be verified and attested.
- There was therefore no need to practice textual criticism and any such effort would be spurious.

The discipline of textual criticism (of whatever text) is predicated on the assumption/allegation/declaration that there is a legitimate doubt about the precise original wording of a text. No one does textual criticism on the 1611 King James Bible, for example, since copies of the original printing still exist. With reference to New Testament textual criticism, the crucial point at issue is the preservation of its Text. **For any text to have objective authority, we have to know what it is.**

But to continue, presumably some areas would be in a better position to protect and transmit the true text than others, and that will be my next topic.