The modern text and version debate has been going on within American Fundamentalism for approximately half a century. In its various manifestations, the dispute over which English translation of the Word of God to use and which underlying Greek and Hebrew texts are authentic has divided brethren and institutions and has caused considerable hard feelings. Many times the discussions of the issue, whether in person, in print, or over the Internet, have generated as much confusion as they have dispelled.

Although, as with all theological and religious controversies, there has been plenty of room for carnal impulses and responses, it is undoubtedly also true that there are many sincere, zealous, and spiritual people on various sides of the issue. It would be a serious mistake to call for an end of debate, even if that were possible. Theological controversy, although never pleasant and often fraught with dangers, has been an essential tool in the providential hand of God to help His children come to a clearer understanding of His revealed truth. Theological debate has helped define the parameters of the Biblical teaching on the Person and nature of Christ, over the nature of faith and works and the relationship between justification and sanctification, and over the inspiration and inerrancy of the Scriptures. Similarly, the debate about texts and translations should be viewed an opportunity to develop a clearer understanding of the concept of the preservation of the Scriptures.

Inspiration and Preservation: A Point of General Agreement

The proper way to understand how God has given His Word to us today is to think in terms of initial inspiration and ongoing preservation. First, the Bible teaches that the human authors of the Scriptures, whether they were prophets of the Old Testament or the apostles of the New Testament, were men uniquely inspired by the Holy Spirit by God to write His words. Although there have been debates among conservatives over, for example, the method God used to inspire the Scriptures, the fact of the Holy Spirit’s control over the sacred writers to pen His words is abundantly demonstrated by statements of the Scriptures. This has been the faith of the Church from its earliest days. Gregg R. Allison writes:

Whether produced by divine dictation or through the cooperate effort of the human authors and the Holy Spirit, all of Scripture—even its very words—is inspired. This was the unanimous consensus of the early church.

Although the verbal and plenary inspiration of the autographs is denied by theological liberals and the neo-orthodox, it continues to be maintained by conservatives. Until the Reformation, preservation was more assumed than discussed. To the author’s knowledge, the first historical creed that mentions preservation is the Westminster Confession, Chapter 1, Paragraph 8.

The Old Testament in Hebrew (which was the native language of the people of God of old), and the New Testament in Greek (which at the time of the writing
Why is this issue so important? Because it determines where we can disagree in fellowship and where we must part company.

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.\(^5\)

Note that the Confession reflects the inspiration/preservation paradigm by saying that the Hebrew and Greek originals were “immediately inspired God” and “kept pure in all ages” by “his singular care and providence.” Some modern statements of faith also specifically refer to inspiration and preservation.\(^6\) It is important to observe that the inspiration/preservation paradigm is shared by individuals and groups that have significantly different convictions on the textual question.\(^7\) In fact representatives of the Eclectic, Majority (or Byzantine), and Received Text views all affirm that they believe in the preservation of the Scriptures. This does not mean that beliefs about preservation are the same. To the contrary, the nature and extent of preservation are matters of serious and even heated dispute. Nevertheless, one blessing of the continuing debate is that questions regarding the nature, scope, and implications of preservation are emerging as the crucial issues in the text and version debate. This is an area of bibliology that historically has not been as clearly defined as other doctrines.

**Biblical Teaching on Preservation: The Key Issue**

Although there is broad general agreement as to the historical fact of preservation of the Scriptures, not all who believe it as a historical matter believe that the Bible specifically teaches it.\(^8\) On the other hand a large number of Fundamentalist writers affirm their belief that the Bible does in fact address preservation, however much they disagree about what the Bible says about it and what conclusions we should draw from it.

Why is this issue so important? Because it determines where we can disagree in fellowship and where we must part company. There are and have been for centuries many disagreements about how to interpret the manuscript evidence. How does one explain the differences in the manuscripts? Are they all the result of innocent scribal errors, or were there deliberate changes for whatever reason? Are there different families of New Testament manuscripts? If so, how are they related to one another? Should some be given a priority, or should some be discarded altogether?
Intertwined with these questions of textual criticism are varying ideas about church history. Some have maintained that the traditional use by the institutional church through the ages has given particular sanction to a group of texts. Others hold that the rise of the printing press and the Reformation marked a high-water mark of theological history and led to the identification of the most accurate Biblical texts. Others believe that the true text of the Scriptures must have been passed down by separatist groups. These issues hinge upon human notions and investigation and not upon divine revelation. As such they have no authority to bind the conscience of believers. We have no right to insist that children of God, with the indwelling Holy Spirit, must conform to our textual or historical theories. That prerogative belongs solely to the Scriptures, which alone can command the conscience.

Therefore preservation becomes the foundation for our discussion. If the Scriptures clearly teach something, we are bound to believe it, and we are obligated to the best of our ability to work out the implications and applications of what it teaches. On the other hand if something cannot be demonstrated to be genuinely taught by the Scriptures or logically required by them, then it cannot be considered a requirement of orthodoxy or a test of fellowship.

The Theology of Preservation: Unfinished Business

Typically, systematic theology books do not address the subject of the preservation of the Scriptures. In some older works the term “preservation” was used to refer to God’s active maintenance of the universe. In recent years, in large part as a result of the textual debate, more attention is being paid to the issue of what the Bible teaches about its own preservation. In addition to the many blog posts and discussion-board debates, various articles and chapter-length contributions have appeared. There is also a book-length treatment that attempts to show expositionally the teaching of “verbal preservation of the Scripture” in a form that “leads men to adopt the ‘King James Only’ position in the textual/version debate.”

This recent activity is productive insofar as it shines light on the Biblical passages and teachings. We should not be so naïve, however, as to believe that this discussion will lead everyone to agreement. The interpretation of passages can be difficult, and many factors can lead us astray. Many arguments regarding this topic are based on inferences one draws from the Biblical teaching, thus leaving more room for human fallibility. We also have to guard against our own biases. Nevertheless, the process and priorities of the inquiry are ones on which Fundamentalists can and should agree. If the history of doctrine is any guide, over time and in God’s providence the boundaries of orthodoxy in this area can be roughly laid out and the areas of permissible disagreement within those boundaries further refined.

Questions Involved in a Biblical Theological Study of Preservation

It is beyond the scope of an article like this to lay out a comprehensive view as to the Biblical teaching on preservation. However, it may be helpful to briefly mention the kinds of issues that are involved in such an attempt.

The Nature of the Bible’s Teaching on the Subject. In the development of any doctrine, it is important to be clear about how different aspects of the teaching are derived. Some things are taught directly and others indirectly as in the Scriptures, words often have multiple meanings. In addition to what passages teach explicitly, they may teach other things implicitly—that is, we may infer that certain things are true as a result of the direct statements. For example, when the New Testament quotes the Old, the author is assuming that he has access to the truth of the passage as originally written. He presumes that the Old Testament text he has available to him has been preserved. This is so even if the author does not say anything explicitly about preservation. Of course, inferences are not as strong as direct statements because they involve an extra layer of reasoning on the part of the interpreter.

One may also draw inferences from the general tenor of the Scripture. Later Scriptures display implicit confidence in the reliability of Scriptures originally written much earlier and transmitted through time. In addition to Biblical theological conclusions such as these, the debate often ranges into the field of systematic theology, where we try to put together the various teachings and relate them to each other, filling in the gaps and answering the question, “What else must be true?” An important example is the implication of verbal, plenary inspiration on the question of the nature of preservation.

The Content and Extent of Preservation. In normal usage, as in the Scriptures, words often have multiple meanings. The correct meaning of many words is determined by context each time the word is used. In theology, key terms often need to be defined unambiguously to make sure that everyone is talking about the same thing. This is true regarding the term “preservation.” Most in the debate affirm that they believe in preservation, but they are in great disagreement over what it means. For example, what is the content of preservation: does it extend to all the words of the originals or does it refer only to the message? Can one talk about preservation only as it relates to the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, or does it extend to translations? Does preservation mean only that the communication of God has eternal validity and can
The brief survey below of various views on preservation is not intended to be exhaustive or authoritative. It attempts to provide a fair sketch of the major views without evaluating them. All of these views affirm that God has preserved His Word, but they disagree significantly as to what that means. The positions on preservation are often closely linked with their supporters’ views on the history of the text. However, the chief benefit of presenting the various views in terms of preservation is that it opens the door for a Biblical theological discussion, with the Scriptures themselves as the final arbiter.

**Position 1: Essential Providential Preservation as a Matter of History**

This position maintains that there is neither a direct Biblical nor an indirect theological doctrine of the preservation of the Scriptures. According to this view, Scripture has been preserved by the providence of God. This providence involves God’s superintendence over normal historical events rather than through His direct intervention (in contrast to the direct operation of the Spirit in inspiration). Preservation extends to the essential message of the Scriptures as well as, to a very high degree, to the actual words. The degree of the preservation of the Scriptures is astonishing, especially when compared to the extant evidence for other texts from the ancient world. The location of the preserved Scriptures is in all the manuscripts (as well as in the ancillary witnesses, such as the versions and citations in extrabiblical literature). Textual criticism can get us very close to the original text, but at least at present, absolute certainty is not attainable. The proponents of this position would adhere to some form of eclectic position when it comes to the New Testament text.

**Position 2: Essential Providential Preservation as a Matter of Doctrine**

This differs from Position 1 in that it holds that the Bible teaches its own preservation either directly or by implication. Nevertheless, the passages in question “only suggest a general promise of preservation without specifying how (what method) or to what extent (how pure) God has chosen to preserve his Word.” In other respects, this position is similar to that of Position 1. Proponents of Position 2 would probably adhere to some form of eclectic approach to the text.

**Position 3: Verbal Providential Preservation as a Matter of Doctrine**

This position holds not only that the Bible teaches and assumes its own preservation but also that it teaches that this preservation extends to the very words of the originals. The very words of the autographs will never pass away and will survive in some form somewhere. The nature of this preservation is providential rather than supernatural. Some would assert that that the text of the autographs was preserved throughout all ages. Others assert that, although the Scriptural commands presume their general availability, the Scriptures do not promise that all the words will be available at all times. Some would also make the argument that providential preservation is a necessary corollary of divine inspiration. Nevertheless, they hold that the Scripture does not teach where or how it will be preserved. Advocates of this position typically argue for the preservation of the totality of the manuscript evidence, although they may not agree about which are the best texts or manuscripts. Some would prefer eclecticism; others hold majority text or Byzantine text positions.

**Position 4: Verbal Providential Preservation and Accessibility to Believers as a Matter of Doctrine**

This position adds to Position 3 by holding, as a matter of doctrine, not only that the words of Scripture must have been guarded from being destroyed or ultimately lost but that they have been available to the Church throughout history. Sometimes this position is tied to specific Scriptural passages and sometimes as a corollary to inspiration. This view does not typically rule out textual variants; neither does it necessarily mean that there must have been an unbroken stream of perfect manuscripts. It also does not teach that every word of the autographs was available to every believer everywhere—only that the words were “generally” available and accessible. This view normally supports some form of the “traditional” text view (Byzantine, majority, or TR), and it rejects any readings that have been “unavailable” for centuries. For this reason, advocates typically reject the usefulness of some more recently discovered manuscripts and support readings that come from manuscripts which they believe to have been continuously used in the church.

**Position 5: Verbal Plenary Miraculous (or Uniquely Providential) Preservation and General Availability Plus the Subsequent Certain Identification of the Perfectly Preserved Text as a Matter of Doctrine**

Advocates of this group often define preservation the same way as in Position 4. Nevertheless, this position adds the idea of certainty of the correct reading. According to this view, the Lord not only promised to make the text available in all ages but also that in spite of the variant readings it is now clear what the true text is. For many advocates of this position, the perfectly preserved words of the autographs are identified as being the Greek Textus Receptus and the Hebrew Masoretic Text that underlie the King James Version. Representatives of this view often argue that plenary verbal inspiration logically requires plenary verbal preservation. They also sometimes argue for a doctrine of the “canonization” of the words of the Scripture: that just as the early church was led to recognize the authentic books of the Bible, so the church was eventually led to recognize the authentic words of the Bible. Sometimes proponents of this view describe preservation as “providential” and sometimes as “miraculous.” In either case the process of preservation has led to complete certainty as to the correct reading in every case.

never be defeated or contradicted, or does it mean that the words once written can never disappear completely in written form from the earth? Moreover, does preservation demand that some, most, or every one of God’s people has access to those words throughout history? What about certainty—does doubt about the correct reading contradict preservation? If so, doubt on whose part and for how long?

The Nature and Method of Preservation. It has been generally agreed that inspiration was a miraculous or direct act of God, while preservation is a providential work. However, the contours of the term “providential” are also a matter of dispute. For example, what did the Westminster Confession mean when it said “singular care and providence” of God? Is this different from God’s general providence? If so, in what way? If God did promise to preserve His Word, how does that intersect with the responsibility that He gave men to be agents in the process? Is there a balance between God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility in this matter? Would God prevent men from making mistakes or somehow overrule their mistakes? Would God allow some copies of His Word to become corrupted while preserving other copies (or groups of copies) from error? Would God allow people to lose for a time access to all or part of His Word as divine judgment or chastisement for their rejection or neglect of it?

These questions are just a partial list of those involved in the text and versions debate, and their appearance here does not mean that we should necessarily expect that the Scriptures will answer them all. There are many theological questions we have that the Lord has not chosen to answer for us. Nevertheless, the existence of these questions indicates that there is much work left to do in the development of a theology of preservation. It may be tempting to adopt the position that looks the most conservative or that is the simplest; however, it is just as much error to go beyond what the Scripture says as it is to fall short of what the Scripture says. We must be as broad as the Bible is broad and as narrow as the Bible is narrow. That demands that we do the demanding work of Scriptural exegesis and theological reasoning.

A Concluding Appeal

Although theological discussion of this sort is never easy, it is the only way to make genuine progress on the issue. In the meantime, those who believe that some of their brethren are laboring under extrabiblical sensibilities should not look down on them for their convictions because they do not line up with the “best textual scholarship.” Likewise, those with a particular and sincere conviction about texts should be careful not to judge their brothers as “liberals” or “heretics” by their own convictions and conclusions rather than by the teachings of the Scripture. We should also be extremely careful that the way we conduct the debate is godly and is not a stumbling-block to our brothers and sisters in Christ (Rom. 10:10–13). Let us in humility seek to discern what the Scriptures actually teach and to act accordingly.

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1 See 2 Peter 3:2. By implication this inspiration must have extended to their secretaries, such as Baruch in the Old Testament (Jer. 36) and Tertius of the New Testament (Rom. 16:22) as well as to New Testament authors who were not themselves apostles, such as Mark and Luke, but who labored closely with apostles and under their authority.

2 See Leviticus 10:11; 2 Samuel 23:2; 2 Chronicles 33:8; 35:6; Jeremiah 36:1, 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 11; Daniel 9:2; Romans 1:2; 1 Corinthians 14:37; 2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20, 21; 3:15, 16.

3 Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 62.


9 An exception is Rolland McCune, who devotes approximately six pages to it in his section on bibliology (A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity: Vol. 1 [Detroit: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, n.d.], pp. 49–55). In addition, Gregg Allison treats the issue in his discussion of inspiration, Historical Theology, 68–69.

