

A Proposed Parallel

It occurs to me that a parallel exists – an analogy at once instructive and unappreciated – between the preservation of *recorded* truth (i.e., the Scriptures) and the preservation of *received* truth (by which I mean orthodoxy, doctrine rightly understood, theology in all of its parts comprehended aright). Specifically, how has God contrived to preserve the truth He has revealed, both palpably (in the pages of Scripture) and conceptually (in the minds of the Bible-believing community)?

THE ANALOGY SUGGESTED

Recorded Truth

I have nothing radical or remotely original to offer here. I would simply point out that among those who embrace a high view of Scripture, there are two prevailing models which (it seems to me) fairly exhaust the spectrum of ideas as to how God has indeed preserved His revealed and *written* Word. I will denominate those: 1) The Magisterial Model, and 2) The Multiplicity Model.

The Magisterial Model. Given the fact that there are so many thousands of witnesses to the original text of the Bible (manuscripts, versions, lectionaries and so on), and again that there are in fact significant differences among those witnesses, the persuasion here is that the only way that God might possibly have preserved the Scriptures is to have miraculously and uniquely provided *one perfect version*. That one perfect text is, in the minds of many today, the King James Version (or perhaps the TR). The basic thesis of the KJV-only community is that this one version must be granted the role of a textual Magisterium, the single, ultimate authority by which all textual issues are immediately and quite simply refereed and decided. In other words (and here I get ahead of myself), the persuasion of the KJV-only fraternity is that the KJV was provided so that with reference to the preservation of Scripture all questions might be summarily settled, and thus that in that regard Jesus' prayer might be answered that "they all might be one."¹

The Multiplicity Model. This model is not off-put by the reality of thousands of extant textual witnesses, even though there are real differences among those witnesses. Indeed, this model celebrates that multiplicity, because it recognizes that the means of providential preservation is to be found in the very fact of that multiplicity, that the text of the Scriptures has been preserved through the processes of transmission and translation not in one perfect text, *but in the totality of those witnesses*. As stated by the faculty of Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, "God has providentially preserved His word in the many manuscripts, fragments, versions, translations, and copies of the Scriptures that are available, and ... by diligent study, comparison, and correlation, the original text (words) can be ascertained."² Again, Dr. Combs of DBTS states in a discussion of the doctrine of preservation, "God has preserved his Word to this day, but because of the means he has chosen to use to accomplish this

¹ I realize that this is a manifest over-simplification of a very complicated set of ideas. I do not mean to generate a discussion as to the merits of the mentality, or as to the legitimacy of my brief characterization. I am persuaded that the KJV-only mentality generically includes the idea that one text is of such unique purity that it is intended to be the standard against which others are measured. And thus that it can play the role in the analogy toward which I am moving here.

² *Inspiration & Preservation of Scripture*, Allen Park, MI: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 1996; available at www.dbts.edu/inspiration.html.

preservation—providentially, through secondary causation—the words of the autographs have not been inerrantly preserved. Instead, God has chosen to allow for variations to occur—variants within the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek copies of the autographs. God has providentially provided all these copies in order to preserve the Scriptures. So it is proper to say that preservation has taken place *in the totality of manuscripts*.³ And B. B. Warfield insisted that this view is codified in the Westminster Confession: “We thus have brought before us by the Confession, in turn, the original autograph of Scripture, produced by the immediate inspiration of God; the preservation of this autographic text *in a multitude of copies* whose production is presided over by God’s singular care and providence...”⁴

So here are two competing models. One perceives Scripture to have been preserved through a single version which, though lately produced, is nonetheless to be assigned the role of Magisterium – again, one translation, based on a small number of witnesses, but intended by God to be the only and ultimate referee, and thus to provide in an uncomplicated and rather one-dimensional manner a *one-ness* throughout the Christian world with regard to the Bible used. There is something about that model which is casually attractive, but most would agree that it is at best flawed and at worst destructive. The other model perceives the great multiplicity of textual witnesses to be central to the divine purpose of preserving the original text. That model demands much more of each generation of Bible believers, as there is no warrant for the idea that the work has been finally done on its behalf. Finally, that latter model is not grieved or consternated by the fact that so many witnesses exist, even though those witnesses disagree in many particulars; rather, that model *celebrates* the multiplicity of witnesses.

My intent in all of this is not to instruct anyone with reference to the finer points of the doctrine of the preservation of Scripture. Rather, I appeal to it only as the basis for what I think might be an instructive analogy. I would suggest that there is an instructive parallel between that world and the world of doctrinal discussion and debate.

Received Truth

God’s revealed truth, having been recorded in the pages of Scripture (and then preserved through the processes of transmission from one generation to another and translation from one language to another), must be accessed and embraced and lived out by generation after generation of believers. In short, revealed truth issues in a body of theological realities about which there is a great deal of debate, and which is nonetheless to be passed along perpetually through the course of this age.

The issue is this: how ought we to conceive God’s intentions as to how that preservation of theological orthodoxy – of received truth, if you will – is best accomplished? And in that same connection, by what means might the individual believer, in whatever quarter of the undeniably diverse and sometimes hostile world of Christian thought he finds himself, have the greatest confidence in the legitimacy of

³Found at <http://evangelicaltextualcriticism.blogspot.com/2006/03/bill-combs-on-divine-preservation.html>; my emphasis.

⁴“The Westminster Confession and the Original Autographs,” in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, ed. John E. Meeter, P&R, 1973, 2:594; my emphasis.

the distinctive expression of Christian orthodoxy he has embraced? I would humbly suggest that the two models discussed under the previous heads are instructive here.

The Magisterial Model. There seems to be an intuitive and/or presuppositional persuasion throughout the Christian community that diversity – differences of opinion regarding this doctrinal issue or that ecclesiastical debate – is fundamentally ignoble and enervating, in short, a blemish on the face which Christianity puts on before the unbelieving world. Stated more positively, the oft-embraced assumed truism is that Christianity would have a greater impact on a lost world if Christians could speak with one united voice and articulate one entirely consistent message – if (to employ a misuse of Scripture probably as common as any), we all could “be one.”

But what to do with the fact that there *are* differences of opinion even among honest, mature, Spirit-indwelt believers? Here is where the Magisterial Model becomes important. If Christianity is going to be truly univocal, someone or something must decide what that voice is going to say.

I would suggest that the magisterium thus employed will be of one of two sorts. First, there is the mandatory or official sort which depends on defined authority. An ecclesiastical office and/or document is identified and is looked to as the ultimate decision-maker in all doctrinal questions and disputes. Generally, some official statement is produced – a catechism or creed – which will be appealed to when any dispute must be settled. This is the approach familiar to us in top-down, hierarchical, denominationally oriented quarters of Christendom.

The second way in which the magisterial model might be framed is less official and more *ad hoc*; it is the voluntary or conceptual approach. This mentality depends on the “common denominator” strategy which distinguishes between “essential” and “non-essential” doctrine, and then unites around that which is deemed “essential” and agrees to disagree over what is “non-essential.” This is the mentality which animates believers who are committed to the Scriptures as the sole and ultimate authority in all doctrinal issues, and who thus are intuitively suspicious of any sort of authority beyond the Bible itself.

In my way of thinking, this second approach is more noble than the former and less given to misuse and ultimate doctrinal deviation. But it seems to me that it arises from the same impulse as the former: negatively, the impulsive disquiet over the divisions that characterize the greater company of Bible believers; positively, the impulse to expand the influence of the Gospel by somehow drawing together and enabling to speak with one voice those who do in fact disagree about many elements of biblical doctrine. In short, it is an effort to define a *conceptual* magisterium which will marginalize disputed issues and thus facilitate a more univocal witness to the world.

Apart from any attempt to critique or defend either sort of “magisterium,” the element of (what I am calling here) the Magisterial Model which I would like to stress – and to challenge – is the implicit and animating conviction that the very fact that such wide diversity obtains in the Christian world is intrinsically a liability to the truth and to the Gospel, that the truth of Scripture would be better served and the testimony of Christianity more effectively presented if such diversity did not exist.

The Multiplicity Model. It is at this point that the analogy I am suggesting becomes (in my fevered mind) instructive. It seems to me that there is a two-fold parallel to the multiplicity model briefly characterized above with reference to the preservation of Scripture.

First, this mentality rejects the idea that truth is best preserved by anointing or acknowledging a magisterium of either sort discussed above – formal or conceptual. Rather, it affirms that the most important element in God's careful and *providential* preservation of the truth once and for all revealed is the *multiplicity* of twice-born, Spirit-indwelt children of God across the world and across the ages, sitting day by day and week by week under shepherd-teachers (the only office actually framed by God in the Scriptures for the instruction and edification of saints and thus the perpetuation of doctrinal truth), struggling as believer-priests with the deposit of divine truth *given them as a stewardship*, and coming to the conclusions to which they are honestly driven by means of that struggle. Again, as with the issue of textual preservation, this model perceives the great multiplicity of individual believers, diverse in many of their conclusions (as is true with the textual witnesses), studying the Scriptures prayerfully and honestly under the watch-care of divinely commissioned undershepherds, to be central to the divine purpose of preserving the intended meaning of the text. In short, the very fact of multiple witnesses – with all of the diversity intrinsic to that reality – is the primary factor in the divine plan to insure that that received truth is rightly comprehended and protected from generation to generation.

And this leads necessarily to the second point of analogy, an analogy of attitude. The mentality that acknowledges the multiple witnesses to received truth as the primary strategy of God in preserving that truth will not be *fundamentally* off-put by the diversity of doctrinal position and ecclesiastical practice that is intrinsic to that reality. Thus there will be no impulse to provide for a contrived univocal expression of the Christian message, to organize the Christian world, at whatever level, for the *sole purpose* of reducing or removing the element of diversity.

At this point, a very important three-fold disclaimer. First, I do not mean to suggest that the multiplicity model leads to a flattening of the world of Christian thought, that by this mentality all ideas must necessarily be accepted as equally valid. To the contrary, to the degree that a competing idea is perceived to be heretical and/or destructive the conscientious believer will strive to build a careful apologetic for his understanding and against that which is thus perceived and will aggressively reject and resist that which is thought to be false teaching. That is a legitimate aspect of the stewardship of truth. And thus my point here is entirely lop-sided. I am persuaded that there is nothing in this model which would lead to the conclusion that a person has no right to resist diverse opinions which he sees as contrary to what the Bible teaches – any more than it would lead to the conclusion that the textual critic, having acknowledged the merits of the multiplicity model in recovering *recorded* truth and having become convinced that a given textual witness is stronger than its competitors, has no right to argue against those competing readings and in favor of what he is persuaded is the correct reading. On the other hand, this model does force the conclusion that there is no merit in abandoning either the responsibility to investigate the Scriptures for oneself (to an official magisterium) or the conclusions

prayerfully and carefully reached by means of those investigations (to a conceptual magisterium), simply for the purpose of achieving the greater good of a united voice.

Which leads to the second caveat. I do not want to be construed as arguing that there is no merit at all in a unified voice, that Christian witness is most effective when it is most thoroughly atomized. God forbid the reprehensible thought! It is wise and God-honoring to unite resources and frame ministry around a shared conviction as to that which is perceived to be clearly revealed in the Scriptures. The point is simply that, by this model, such unity is not the *summum bonum* of Christian ministry and endeavor. Thus there is no impulse to abandon responsibility or genuine convictions in order to eliminate diversity. The multiplicity model does not *crave* or deliberately *create* diversity; but neither is it fundamentally and programmatically offended by the reality of diversity.

And thirdly, I am not suggesting that because diversity is important to the perpetuation and propagation of received truth, the spirit with which one's distinctive convictions are embraced is unimportant. The Bible inveighs against a haughty and censorious spirit, the attitude of hubris which delights in division, exudes disdain for all its detractors, and refuses to consider honestly the criticisms leveled against it by its opponents. Indeed, the genius of the multiplicity model is the self-correcting mechanism which is inherent to it; because of the free-for-all quality of the ongoing struggle for a proper conception of doctrinal truth, there is always someone able and anxious to challenge whatever position a person might embrace. An arrogant and unteachable spirit immediately and inevitably short circuits the model (Prov 18:17).

THE ANALOGY APPLIED

In sum, I am arguing that the insight so central to what many see as the proper approach to the preservation of *recorded* truth (the text of Scripture) is instructive as to a proper understanding of the way in which God has designed to preserve *received* truth (the teaching of Scripture). In brief, that analogy is this: as the preservation of the text of Scripture has been accomplished by God through the multiplicity of often diverse witnesses which can thus be employed as a means of challenging and/or corroborating one another, so the preservation of the *teaching* of Scripture has been accomplished through the multiplicity of consecrated thinkers whose diverse and often competing insights and conclusions have had the effect of challenging and/or sanctioning one another (in the mind of this or that student). The analogy is inexact, to be sure. Indeed, it breaks down entirely as to end-product: there is nearly universal persuasion that the text of the Bible has been virtually recovered through the efforts of textual criticism, but there is no persuasion anywhere that absolute doctrinal purity has been attained through the generations of thought and interaction by students of the Scriptures. Perhaps that reality invalidates the analogy altogether. I'm not convinced that it does. To the contrary, I am persuaded that the analogy is at least instructive with regard to the *process* by which God has chosen to perpetuate and propagate the truth received from the Scripture.

AN AFTERWORD

Apart from the merit of the analogy suggested here, I would argue that the *multiplicity* model (which – with all the appropriate caveats discussed above – is not

fundamentally offended by the reality of diversity of opinion in the world of thinking Christians) is to be preferred over the *magisterial* model (which seeks to find some way to marginalize all diversity in the supreme interest of functional – if not substantive – unity and the more univocal expression of Christianity which can arise from that) on several counts.

First, it honors the character of Scripture as the authoritative Word of God. The distinction most often employed as the “magisterium” necessary to effect greater unity and less diversity, the bifurcation of biblical teaching into categories of “essential” and “non-essential,” seems to compromise that authority; the *human thinker* must decide what parts of God’s Word are so essential (to salvation, to some undefined concept of orthodoxy, or whatever) as to be non-negotiable, but he determines that the balance of what is taught in the Scripture is not worthy of that measure of submission and allegiance. To be sure, no matter what perspective is brought to the effort to preserve doctrinal purity, there will have to be choices made as to what is non-negotiable and what can be equivocated upon. But it would seem more noble to depend upon a criterion of Scriptural *clarity* than to employ a mentality which acknowledges that the Bible speaks clearly to an issue but then decides that that issue is not important enough to insist upon. (That is, it would be more noble to determine to submit to and embrace all that the Scriptures *clearly* teach; if the Scriptures are manifest *to me*, I will not equivocate on the issue, but if there is not sufficient clarity to come to any firm conclusion on a given issue, I will not take a confident or dogmatic stand on that issue.)

Second, this approach is consistent with Paul’s teaching that the church is the ground or buttress of the truth (1 Tim 3:15). Exegetical considerations make it clear to me that the “church” of which Paul speaks in that passage is the local church, which means that Paul’s precise point is that congregations of believers across the world and the ages, studying and obeying the Word of God, constitute God’s plan to propagate⁵ and preserve⁶ the truth recorded by divine revelation in the pages of Scripture. But unless the word is understood in a hierarchical sense entirely foreign to the New Testament, the reference cannot be to a magisterium, either official or conceptual, which is responsible for the perpetuation of doctrinal purity.

Third, this mentality is consistent with the twin doctrines of the priesthood of the believer and the perspicacity (essential clarity) of the Scriptures, doctrines which are clearly taught in the New Testament and which were precious and pivotal to the Reformers. If the layman is not dependent upon trained and ordained clergy in order to know the meaning of Scripture, and if the believer is going to be held accountable as a steward for how he handled that sacred library, it cannot follow that the teaching of Scripture will be most certainly discovered and preserved by imposing upon him the doctrinal conclusions of some magisterial authority, or by pre-defining those categories of doctrine which should be considered off-limits lest the ensuing discussion endanger the perception of unity so important to the Christian witness.

⁵ Thus Paul pictures the church as the “pillar” of the truth, that which adorns the truth, making it beautiful and attractive to the world – which was the primary architectural function of the pillar in Paul’s era.

⁶ Again, Paul speaks of the church as the “ground” of the truth; the word picture refers to the buttress set in place on bedrock to keep the building firm and immovable.

Fourth, this approach encourages initiative and integrity on the part of the individual believer, as it confronts him with the reality of his personal stewardship as a student of the Word of God. That individual child of God need not be burdened with the impression that the perpetuity of God' truth is somehow *his* special responsibility, as if the weight of doctrinal purity across the world of mankind is his to carry all alone; but he ought to live with the reality that for him and his house, it is precisely and sublimely his responsibility to know the Scripture aright and to teach that truth to his sons and to his son's sons (Dt 4:9).

Finally, this mentality certainly has history on its side. Entrusting divine truth to a cadre of supposed theological experts and/or ecclesiastical authorities has not proven effective in the effort to preserve truth or resist error. And I would suggest that the mentality which sits in judgment upon Scripture to determine what is sufficiently important as to demand allegiance has inevitably had a corrosive effect in the space of brief spiritual generations. But it never ceases to be startling that Christians gathered around the Bible – often in places where persecution is strong, resources are scarce and communication is difficult – come to understand the teachings of that book with remarkable and delightful unanimity of thought and attitude.

THE SUM OF THE MATTER

There is no virtue in diversity for the sake of diversity, but neither is diversity in the world of Christian thought and ministry an intrinsic wickedness or liability.

The mentality which assumes that disparity of conviction is crippling to the Christian witness, and which thus contrives to define some strategy of marginalizing or eliminating all diversity – even at the cost of compromising absolute allegiance to that which the Bible clearly teaches – is ill-conceived and counter-productive.

The individual child of God, as a believer-priest and as a steward of the truth recorded in the Scriptures, is under sacred obligation to study those Scriptures carefully and to whole-heartedly and sacrificially embrace and contend for that which he learns. All of that must be done in a spirit of selflessness and submission which honors the God whose Word he is studying, and which takes into account what that Bible says about who he is and what provisions have been made to assist him in that study.

The sum of divinely revealed truth has been and shall be best preserved and most effectively displayed as believers consciously and aggressively live in light of that stewardship.

P.S. If any of this is – in fact or in impression – contrary to that spirit, may God forgive me and deliver you from any confusion or corruption of mind or spirit.