

# PURE WORDS, PRESERVED WORDS: THE DOCTRINE OF PROVIDENTIAL PRESERVATION Douglas W Taylor

*The words of the LORD are pure words... Thou shalt keep them,  
O LORD, thou shalt preserve them... for ever.*

*[Psalm 12:6-7]*

*The Old Testament in Hebrew... and the New Testament in  
Greek... being immediately inspired by God, and by his singular  
care and providence kept pure in all ages, are therefore  
authentic; so as in all controversies of religion, the Church is  
finally to appeal to them.*

*[Westminster Confession of Faith 1:viii]*

## Introduction

Although the Scriptures contain many statements proving that it was always the purpose of God to preserve the words which He had inspired men to write (Psalm 12:6-7, Isaiah 59:21, Matthew 5:18, Luke 16:17, 1 Peter 1:25 and many others) and although no one who takes up the Scriptures and reads them believingly has any doubt that the words he is reading have been preserved in God's providence, no explicit doctrinal statement of this truth was formulated till the period of the Reformation. As has so often been the case, the church's confession of faith on this point had to be hammered out in the fires of controversy – in this case, controversy with un-reformed Roman Catholicism. And in this area, as in so many others, the Reformation established a firm foundation for those who were to come after.

The doctrine of providential preservation was the Protestant response to Rome's attempt to undermine the Reformation assertion of "Sola Scriptura" – that Scripture alone was authoritative in the church. We will look briefly at some aspects of this controversy, review more recent re-interpretations of the doctrine and attempt to draw a few lessons for today.

## Providential Preservation Asserted

The Reformation called the entire professing church to return to

the Scriptures. For too long she had been giving heed to the voices of men more than the voice of "her own Spouse and Pastor," Jesus Christ, as John Knox and his associates put it. Scripture alone was authoritative, and authoritative in its own right, not by any authentication given it by the church of Rome. (See the statements on the authority of Scripture in the *Scots Confession*, *Belgic Confession* and *Second Helvetic Confession*.) But this assertion on the part of the entire Reformation movement did not long go unchallenged. Rome's counter-attack had several prongs but the most significant for our present purpose was to question the reliability of the Scriptures in the original languages. These, according to Rome, had been corrupted to such an extent that they were no longer a sufficient guide to the will of God. In the place of the Scriptures in the original languages – the Masoretic Hebrew text and the Greek text, later known as the *Textus Receptus*, accepted as verbally inspired and infallible by the Reformation movement as a whole – Rome exalted the Latin *Vulgate*, together with her own body of infallible traditions. In the Second Decree of the Council of Trent issued in April 1546, the *Vulgate* was declared to be the only authentic version, while the Greek text of Erasmus was officially placed on the index of forbidden books.

Many Roman controversialists, such as Bellarmine and Stapleton, now pressed home their attacks on Protestantism with increased vigour, confident that the Reformation's weapon of "Sola Scriptura" could be neutralised. Among those who answered them was William Whitaker (1548–95), Regius Professor of Divinity in the University of Cambridge [and] reckoned by many contemporaries the greatest English divine of the 16th century, who published his *Disputation of the Holy Scripture against the Papists, especially Bellarmine and Stapleton* in 1588. In this work he denied that the Scripture had been corrupted, affirming its entire preservation by the providence of God. "If God had permitted the scripture to perish in the Hebrew and Greek originals, in which it was first published by men divinely inspired, he would not have provided sufficiently for his church and for our faith. From the prophetic and apostolic scripture the church takes its origin and the faith derives its source." [Parker Society edition, 1849, p 148.]

"We must hold, therefore, that we have now those very ancient scriptures which Moses and the other prophets published, although we have not, perhaps, precisely the same forms and shapes of the

letters." [*Ibid*, p 117.]

The absoluteness of God's control over the writing and preserving of the Scriptures was asserted very strongly in sermons preached by John Jewel, Bishop of Salisbury, in 1570: "There is no sentence, no clause, no word, no syllable, no letter, but it is written for thy instruction: there is not one jot but it is sealed and signed with the blood of the Lamb.... no word, no syllable, no point or prick thereof, but it is written and preserved for thy sake." [*Treatise of the Holy Scriptures, gathered out of sermons preached by Bishop Jewel at Salisbury, 1570, Parker Society edition, 1850, p 1175.*]

This is the essence of the Protestant doctrine of providential preservation. The full import of the doctrine was to be brought out more precisely in the 17th century by such men as John Owen in England and Francis Turretin in Switzerland and stated in the *Westminster Confession* and the *Formula Consensus Helvetica* (1675) but, in the answers of men like Jewel and Whitaker in England and the Lutheran divines in Germany to the Roman position expressed at the Council of Trent and by Bellarmine and others, the central core of the doctrine was already expressed: the divinely inspired words were providentially preserved. The Scriptures in the hands of the Church were completely reliable.

### Providential Preservation Defined

The statement from the *Westminster Confession of Faith* quoted above was the first creedal formulation of providential preservation. It was not intended to state a new doctrine, however, but to reaffirm the common conviction of the church through the centuries that the Scriptures in the original languages were the authentic court of appeal in all controversies, not a version such as the *Vulgate*, as Rome now claimed.

It is important to note that it was not the original autographs of the prophets and apostles, which might be recovered more precisely as time passed, to which appeal was to be made, but the Scriptures preserved in purity by God's singular care and providence in all ages. What these were is clarified for us by one of the Westminster divines, John Lightfoot, perhaps the greatest biblical scholar to take part in the work of the Assembly. After affirming that the church of Rome, far from giving us the Scriptures, actually sought to hinder us from having them, Lightfoot says: "No, it was the work of the Lord, and the mercy of the Lord; and it is marvellous in our eyes... As far as we owe

our receiving of Scripture to men, we are least beholden to the Romish church. They put us off with a Latin translation, barbarous and wild. But we have a surer word, the sacred Hebrew and divine Greek. And the Hebrew we owe to the Jews, and the Greek to the Greek church, rather than the Roman." [*Works*, vi, p 61.]

Lightfoot thus declares that the Hebrew Old Testament text preserved for us was that given to us by the Jews, the Masoretic Text, while the Greek New Testament text preserved for us was that given to us by the Greek church, which came to be known as the *Textus Receptus*. This confirms what orthodox Christians have always believed: that the Scriptures were preserved in actual use, in the bosom of the church, first the Jewish, then the Greek-speaking church, not hidden away in some obscure corner. The words of God have been preserved in the mouth of Christ and His people, as Isaiah 59:21 teaches. John Owen called the promise contained in this verse "the great charter of the church's preservation of truth." ["Of the Integrity and Purity of the Hebrew and Greek Text of Scripture," *Works*, xvi, p 381.]

The discussions of this subject by Owen and Turretin are particularly important as indicating a Reformed response to the origins of the critical approach to Scripture. For her own purposes, Rome and her allies fostered this type of approach to undermine "Sola Scriptura." In essence, their position was that the Scriptures are corrupted. Variations abound to such an extent that no one can know the true Word of God from the Scriptures alone. Therefore the Protestants must return to the true [Roman] Church for infallible guidance. Owen sums it up: "So... there is nothing left unto men but to choose whether they will be Papists or Atheists." [*Works*, xvi, p 286.] and Turretin declares that the issue of the purity of the original-language texts "lies between us and the papists who speak against the purity of the sources for the purpose of establishing more easily the authority of the *Vulgate* version and leading us away to the tribunal of the church." [*Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol 1, p 106.] Both men replied by re-asserting and defining the doctrine of providential preservation. Granting that variations did exist among the manuscripts, they both insisted that this did not at all affect the point at issue. God in His providence had set His seal upon the texts preserved in the Jewish and Greek churches. All the Reformation had done in this matter was to recognise the effects of this providence and embrace these texts.

The authentic Protestant position is heard clearly in the second great creedal affirmation of providential preservation, the *Formula Consensus Helvetica* (1675), written for the Swiss Reformed Churches by Turretin, Gernler and Heidegger:

God, the Supreme Judge, not only took care to have His word, which is the "power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth" (Romans 1:16), committed to writing by Moses, the Prophets, and the Apostles, but has also watched and cherished it with paternal care ever since it was written up to the present time, so that it could not be corrupted by craft of Satan or fraud of man. Therefore the Church justly ascribes it to His singular grace and goodness that she has, and will have to the end of the world, a "sure word of prophecy" and "Holy Scriptures" (2 Timothy 3:15), from which, though heaven and earth perish, "one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass" (Matthew 5:18).

### **Providential Preservation Re-interpreted**

We have seen that the Reformation churches believed that the Scriptures in the original languages had always been the object of the particular providential care of God. The Old and New Testaments, in their entirety and in their integrity, were preserved in purity in the texts received from the Jewish and Greek Churches. Variations certainly existed among the manuscripts but these could be distinguished from the standard preserved texts, and the church was actually in possession of the pure Word of God. In the course of time, however, two major re-interpretations of providential preservation emerged. Both drew back from the authentic Reformation position and made substantial concessions to critical approaches to the Scriptures.

The first of these was to say that the doctrines, rather than the words of Scripture, were the object of divine preservation. No matter which manuscripts were used, according to the proponents of this view, the great doctrines and precepts of Scripture would remain unchanged. This position was espoused in the 17th century by Louis Cappel and replied to by John Owen. As Owen pointed out, it was a dangerous and unnecessary concession to disbelief in providential preservation. Dangerous, because "it will not be found so easy a matter, upon a supposition of such corruption in the originals as is pleaded for, to evince unquestionably that the whole saving doctrine itself, at first given out from God, continues entire and incorrupt." ["The Divine Original of Scripture," *Works*, xvi, p 302.]; unnecessary, because the preservation of the Scripture was a fact and required no such concession. The only guarantee of the preservation of the saving doctrine of the gospel was the preservation of Scripture in its integrity.

The other major re-interpretation of preservation was to say that the true text of Scripture is dispersed throughout the manuscripts which survive. No one manuscript or printed edition, certainly not the Masoretic Hebrew or *Textus Receptus* Greek, contains all the inspired words. Rather, we must trust the textual critics to sift out the true readings for us and thankfully accept what they offer us in the form of modern Bible versions. This eclectic position, the legacy of the 19th century concessions to the critical onslaught on Scripture, is espoused today by countless evangelical writers and preachers. Yet it throws the question of the true state of the text into complete confusion and hands the matter over to scholars whose commitment to truth and godliness we may well doubt. These scholars are, moreover, hopelessly divided among themselves. Is God's written Word safe in such hands? What is regarded as Scripture today may be omitted tomorrow if the consensus of scholarly opinion inclines that way. Indeed, many verses regarded as inspired by the Reformers and the Westminster Divines and used as proof texts in the *Westminster Confession* and other confessions of the Reformation churches, have already been rejected by the scholars responsible for the modern Bible versions.

### **Importance of Providential Preservation Today**

The church still needs to hear the voice of "her own Spouse and Pastor" just as much as she did at the Reformation, and to know that it is His authentic voice that she hears. With the claims of self-styled charismatic prophets and apostles and the supposedly authoritative pronouncements of Rome ringing in her ears, she needs to be able to point to the objective written Word of God as her authority. And with modern Bibles omitting or questioning whole sections, such as the last twelve verses of Mark's Gospel or the incident of the woman taken in adultery and denying that the Scripture says that GOD was manifest in the flesh (1 Timothy 3:16), she needs to know what that objective Word really says.

She needs also to be protected from the contrasting attacks of Romanism and rationalism, both playing down the authority of Scripture, and to know that there is still another way besides the stark choice of "whether to be Papists or Atheists" – namely, to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd and to follow Him.

She needs to be alerted to the fact that the Bible of the Reformation (not only the King James *Authorised Version* but the Dutch *Statenvertaling*, Luther's translation and other Bibles of the

(Continued on page 8)

the church clung closely to her first love, when her words would more likely have been as Ruth's to Naomi, "Entreat me not to leave thee." But her present duty is to repent!

Notice also, it is not to confine the hope of God's favour to another world. The hope of the glory of God is not to interpose between us and present duty. "Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation" (Psalm 51:12) was not a vain request on the lips of a penitent. They are not to settle down to a dolorous existence. The call to repentance is away from darkness into greater light. Nor is the Lord calling them to censure their rulers, to belittle their generation, upbraiding others, disparaging the efforts of those who labour in the gospel. It is a call, I repeat, to repentance.

Oh! how our beloved land of Scotland needs repentance! The call of our Lord in the first century was to the churches [and] in them to individuals, congregations, teachers of divinity, preachers, office-bearers, members, male and female, old and young.

I know I speak on your behalf and behalf of many throughout our land when I send out a trumpet call. Let us all with one heart return to the everlasting, tried and tested Biblical doctrines of our fathers. Then, as a nation, we "shall look upon him whom we have pierced, and we shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for his only son, and shall be in bitterness for him, as one that is in bitterness for his firstborn" (Zech 12:10).

**PROVIDENTIAL PRESERVATION** (*Continued from page 14*) period) springs from a set of assumptions about providential preservation and the reality of a preserved text completely different from those underlying modern versions. She needs to become aware that modern versions represent the Trojan Horse of a liberal/critical approach to Scripture in the very heart of the evangelical citadel and to take appropriate action, if the triumph of this alien influence is not to become complete. She needs to realise that to buy and use a modern version is to buy a whole package of assumptions hostile to the historic faith and the reality of an infallible Bible, and to regain her confidence in the Old Book given to her by the providence of God, working in and through His church.

There are some hopeful signs of this beginning to happen. May the Lord confirm and establish His own pure and preserved words, for the glory of His Name and the salvation of His people.