



Orthodox Presbyterian Church

**A Sermon on The Preservation of Scripture from Matthew 5:17-18  
Delivered by the Rev. Christian M. McShaffrey at Five Solas Church  
on the Sabbath morning of August 9th, in the year of our Lord 2020**

*Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.* Why would the Lord have to say such a thing? Obviously, some had accused him of being about the devil's business (i.e., undermining and attacking the inspired words of God), but this accusation was false and foolish.

The accusation was false because Christ had not *come to destroy* the old covenant, but rather *to fulfil* or "confirm and ratify" it by quickening, with his Spirit, the dead letter, and exhibiting, in reality, what had hitherto appeared only in figures.<sup>1</sup> The accusation was also quite foolish, for even his motive had been *to destroy the law* (which it was not), such a mission would have been doomed from the start because of the essential indestructibility of scripture. That is the doctrine upon which Christ's apologetic was based: **Divine Providential Preservation**

Historically speaking,<sup>2</sup> vs. 18 has been accepted by the Protestant Orthodox as the classic proof text for this doctrine, but before any exegesis of the verse is offered, let us define our terms. "Preservation" means the act or process of keeping something in its original estate. "Divine" indicates that this work of preserving is the work of God, not man. "Providential" identifies the specific manner of God's operation.

Everyone enjoys reading about the miraculous operations of God like when he parted the Red Sea, caused the Sun to stand still, turned back the shadow of the sun ten degrees, etc. Even more intriguing are the miracles wrought by Christ. He fed thousands, healed many, walked on water, calmed the raging sea with a word, and by his resurrection

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<sup>1</sup> Calvin, John. *Harmony of the Evangelists*, Vol XVI. Calvin's Commentaries. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996

<sup>2</sup> In 1647 the Westminster Assembly adopted Matt. 5:18 as the proof for this confessional statement: "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 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 authentic" [WCF 1.8]

from the dead on the first day of the week, conquered sin, put death to flight, and gave us hope of everlasting life.

Such conspicuous displays of God's power are common in scripture, but there is also a manner of divine operation that is equally as effective, but oftentimes overlooked: **God's Providence**, which is his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures; ordering them, and all their actions, to his own glory.<sup>3</sup> God's providence determines things as seemingly insignificant as the number of hairs on your head or the falling of a sparrow to the ground. It also determines things as monumental as the rise and fall of empires.

Jesus believed in God's providence and so should you. More specifically, he believed that God, by his providence, personally preserved the scriptures which he himself had inspired.

This doctrine of Divine Providential Preservation is denied by most scholars today, but that should not surprise you, for Jesus often introduced his lessons saying, *Ye have heard that it was said, but I say unto you*. It is a very good reminder that we should never base our beliefs on what men say (even the most educated and credentialed of them). Rather, we should always base our beliefs on what Jesus taught and when it came to providential preservation, this was his claim: *For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled*.

The sense here is obvious. Jesus was saying that "it is easier for heaven and earth to pass, than for one point of the law to fail"<sup>4</sup> and he could say that because scripture is inherently infallible (lit., not able to fall). With this statement all should agree immediately and in implicit faith. Lest any be tempted to doubt, do mark well the words and phrases he used to establish this doctrine:

*Verily I say unto you* - Jesus, as the Word incarnate, could have simply said, *I say*, but instead he begins with the word *verily*. No other person in the Bible introduced his sayings in this manner, so it is worthy of note.

The word<sup>5</sup> literally means "amen" and the sense is "true, fixed, steadfast, so be it" or more colloquially, "Let there be no doubt whatsoever about this." The word almost carries with it the force of a divine oath. This is the also first occurrence of the word in the New Testament, which proves how foundational the doctrine of bibliology truly is. The first *verily*

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<sup>3</sup> *Westminster Larger Catechism*. Q&A 18.

<sup>4</sup> Calvin, John. *Harmony of the Evangelists*, Vol XVI. Calvin's Commentaries. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996

<sup>5</sup> ἀμήν, transliteration: amén, phonetic spelling: am-ane' [Strong's #281]

was spoken not to defend the deity of Christ or the doctrines of grace, but the stability of the text of scripture.

Having thus seized the attention of his hearers with this word *verily*, Jesus states the doctrine most clearly: *Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.*

*Till heaven and earth pass* - This was a rather intense way of saying, “never” (as in, “Let me tell you one thing that will never change”) and this kind of argument is significant in-and-of-itself because it confronts unbelief and even contradicts man’s felt experience under the sun.

By the time Jesus entered time and space through his incarnation, all the brightest minds of unbelief had already come to one point of philosophical and scientific agreement: “Life is flux”<sup>6</sup> or as it is commonly paraphrased, “Change is the only constant in the universe.” That is simply not true. God is the only constant in the universe and when God speaks, those words also become an inviolable constant. All things are created and upheld *by the word of his power* (Heb. 1:3).

As you observe change and decay in almost every aspect of the creation, never forget that your Saviour, who is the eternal Logos, claimed that there is at least one thing in this world that will not, yea cannot change: *Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.*

When Christ said *the law*, he was obviously not speaking only of the Pentateuch (i.e., the first five books of Moses) for he already mentioned *the prophets* in the previous verse. This, rather, is classic case synecdoche. Synecdoche is a literary device (or figure of speech) in which a part of something is substituted for the whole. The Bible is filled with examples, but consider just two.

Romans 12:1, *I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice.* No one would be so foolish as to suggest that our minds or our spirits are exempt from that calling due to the fact that they are not specifically mentioned in the verse. Likewise, when Paul said there were *two hundred threescore and sixteen souls* onboard a ship (Acts 27:37), it is patently obvious that they were whole persons (not disembodied spirits).

Synecdoche is common in scripture and by saying *the law* Jesus was referring to the entire Bible that existed in his day (i.e., the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament). This

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<sup>6</sup> Attributed to Heraclitus, a nobleman from Ephesus who developed his philosophy around 500 BC. His thoughts influenced the later philosophies of Plato and the Stoics. Hegel and Nietzsche also admired his ideas.

being his clear intent, it is also not unreasonable to expand his claim to the twenty-seven books which were soon be inspired and incorporated into the sacred canon.

“Canon” refers to the entire collection of inspired writings and while it is important to identify scripture as a whole, it must also be acknowledged that Christ spoke not only of the books as a collection, but also of the content of those books (i.e., the chapters, the sentences, the words, the letters, even the minute pen strokes that make a letter), for he says, *Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass.*

A *jot* is the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet. It looks exactly like an English apostrophe, but it is a letter, not a punctuation mark. By mentioning the *jot*, Jesus was affirming the stability of scripture on even the smallest scale.

The *tittle* is even smaller than the *jot*. It is, in fact, not even a full letter. It is more like the serif in our English typeface, but it is not merely ornamental. This “little horn” or “little hook” actually distinguishes one letter from another in the Hebrew alphabet. Think, by way of illustration, of our English letter O. If one adds a pen-stroke to the base, you now have a Q. Hebrew letters also work like that and some of their distinguishing pen-strokes are smaller than our own.

The design of our Saviour in describing the integrity of God’s word on such a minute level is this: to prevent believers from adopting a “big picture” approach to the doctrine of bibliology. God did not inspire general thoughts or inspirational ideas, he inspired actual words, that consisted of actual jots and tittles, that were actually written on actual pieces of a paper. Few Christians would disagree with that view of inspiration.

The disagreement arises when someone points out the undeniable fact that those actual pieces of paper no longer exist. The original inspired documents are gone. Some were destroyed by emperors and inquisitors. Some simply succumbed to the vicissitudes of time.

The question that naturally arises is this: do the copies bear the same perfections as the originals<sup>7</sup> (i.e., necessity, authority, verity, integrity, sanctity, perspicuity, efficacy, and perfection)?

Most Christians want to answer, “Yes” because they naturally “expect that the Holy Spirit, who so carefully guided the writers of scripture in the interest of future generations, would also guard and watch over his revelation in order that it might really serve its purpose.” Inspiration naturally calls for conservation.<sup>8</sup> This is a quote from a standard

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<sup>7</sup> To engage in further study on this topic, these technical terms must be learned: *autographa* refers to the inspired originals and *apographa* refers to the copies.

<sup>8</sup> Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology*. The Inspiration of Scripture (IV.D.4). Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans, 1938.

conservative Systematic Theology written in the Twentieth Century. It accurately describes the natural expectation of those who believe in inspiration, and it also seems to agree with what Jesus taught concerning providential preservation; but sadly, the next section goes on to enumerate variations in the copies, to minimize the importance of them, and finally to admit that “we do not know at present in what reading we have the Word of God on those particular points.”

This is the tragedy of modern bibliology. With one hand it offers the assurance, “We are still in possession of the verbally inspired Word of God” and with the other hand it revokes that assurance, saying “We just don’t know where it is at the present time. It might be up in the text, it might be down in the footnote, and it might still be buried in the sands of Alexandria waiting to be discovered.”

The existence of variant readings amongst the copies cannot be denied. Even the hands of the most careful copyists will occasionally slip, but that is why the doctrine of providential preservation is so important. It assures the Christian that God watched over his own word with careful eye and guiding hand.

Again, not all agree. An entire industry has evolved in academia which exists to sift through all the variants, speculate as to their origin, and seek to restore or reconstruct the authentic readings. The fatal flaw in this approach is that it presumes corruption rather than preservation; as if the transmission of holy scripture was no different than any other historical document. This assumption is completely out-of-accord with the claims of Christ.

When Jesus spoke of *the law* or *the prophets*, he was not referring to documents that no longer existed. He was not saying, “The jots and tittles that no longer exist *shall in no wise pass.*” That would be absurd. The law from which Jesus read in the synagogue was a copy of a copy of copy of what Moses originally wrote some fourteen-hundred years prior. No scroll survives that long (especially if it is being used on a weekly or daily basis). Jesus knew this and it troubled him not at all, because he believed that God, even from ancient of times, had overseen the accurate transmission of scripture from one generation to another.<sup>9</sup>

On at least one occasion, he did this by way of miracle. The tablets Moses brought down from Mount Sinai were *the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, graven upon the tables* (Ex. 32:16). After Moses destroyed them in his anger, the Lord said, *Hew thee two tables of stone like unto the first: and I will write upon these tables the words that were in the first tables, which thou brakest.* (Ex. 34:1) As a miraculously restored copy, this was definitely the

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<sup>9</sup> The following examples are gleaned from Greg L. Bahnsen’s “The Inerrancy of the Autographa” in *Inerrancy* by Norman Geisler [ed.]. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979. Note: Dr. Bahnsen arrives at a different conclusion than this author; limiting inerrancy to the *autographa*.

exception. Other references to God's faithfulness to transmit his word with accuracy are far less spectacular. Examples:

After the battle at Ai, Joshua built an altar and then *wrote there upon the stones a copy of the law of Moses, which he wrote in the presence of the children of Israel.* (Joshua 8:32).

The law did include a provision for making copies. Speaking of the king, it was written: *And it shall be, when he sitteth upon the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write him a copy of this law in a book out of that which is before the priests the Levites: And it shall be with him, and he shall read therein all the days of his life: that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, to keep all the words of this law and these statutes, to do them.* (Deut. 17:18-19)

As King Solomon read his copy of Moses' writings, he read them not as the words of man (or a mere copyist), but as the very words of God. Further, as an inspired writer of scripture himself (i.e., most of the Proverbs), Solomon also appointed copyists. Proverbs 25:1, *These are also proverbs of Solomon, which the men of Hezekiah king of Judah copied out.*

Jesus knew about this method of transmission and believed that the copies that existed in his day were perfectly reliable. That is why he was able to quote so authoritatively from Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Psalms, Isaiah, etc. without ever hinting at the possibility that some distinction should be made between the originals and the copies. Every reference to scripture he made was to be believed and received *as every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God* (Matt. 4:4); not only because it had been inspired, but also because it had been preserved by God's singular care and providence through all the ages.

His holy apostles believed and taught the exact same thing. As Peter quoted the Psalms and as Paul quoted the Prophets, they too gave no indication that the copies they had in hand differed in any way from the original documents. Why should you believe any differently? Because times have changed? Change they will, but God's word does not, because it cannot.

The study of bibliology, as you are hopefully beginning to see, cannot be engaged on a purely academic level. It will eventually force the student to make a choice between the three main views on how divine inspiration and divine preservation relate. As they are here summarized, take time to ponder the question: "To which school of thought can my believing soul subscribe?"

**Naturalism** - Many deny any supernatural involvement in either the writing or the copying of scripture. These epistemological atheists see the Holy Bible as being no different than any other book. If you choose this position, you will suffer eternal perdition.

**Near Atheism** - This is not outright atheism, for it will admit the existence of God and also allow for supernatural involvement in divine inspiration. However, and insofar as it

then leaves scripture abandoned to the fate of any other earthly book, it does indeed border on atheism (at very least, practical atheism).<sup>10</sup> You may subscribe to this school of thought if you wish, but there is a better way.

**Non Modernism** - Christians need to get back to what Jesus and his Apostles believed. They need to get back to what the Reformation era dogmaticians believed.<sup>11</sup> They need to get back to what their fathers in the faith (e.g., John Owen, Francis Turretin, Petrus van Mastricht, R.L. Dabney, etc. ) believed: That we are — today — in possession of the original and authentic text of holy scripture. By this, we do not mean the originals (which for many reasons belonging to the most wise counsel of divine providence were allowed to perish), but in the copies as well.<sup>12</sup>

God has revealed himself through the miracle of divine inspiration. He has also preserved that revelation (even on a jot and tittle level) through the mystery of divine providence. Believe it. You will be blessed. Amen.

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<sup>10</sup> Owen, John. *Of the Divine Original, Authority, Self-Evidencing Light, and Power of the Scriptures*, etc. Oxford: Printed by Henry Hall, printer to the University, for Tho: Robinson., 1659. pg. 173.

<sup>11</sup> For a detailed discussion on "The Authentic Editions and the Text of Scripture" in the 16-17th centuries, read Richard A. Muller's "Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics", Volume Two, pp. 396-441.

<sup>12</sup> Mastricht, *Ibid.*, pg. 414