

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

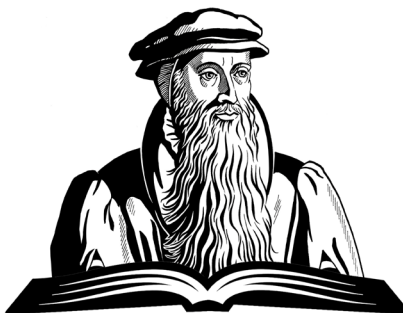
by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 1:

INTRODUCTION and THE DOCTRINE OF FIRST PRINCIPLES

Lecture 8

PRESERVATION AND TRANSLATION OF SCRIPTURE



The John Knox Institute
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Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Module 1 ~ Lecture 8

Introduction:

1. Methodology
2. Creeds and Confessions

The Doctrine of First Principles:

3. Scripture
4. Revelation
5. The Inspiration of Scripture
6. Properties of Inspired Scripture
7. The Canon of Holy Scripture
- 8. Preservation and Translation of Scripture**
9. Interpretation of Scripture
10. The Continuity of Scripture

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Module 1 ~ Lecture 8

PRESERVATION AND TRANSLATION OF SCRIPTURE

Imagine owning something that you consider very special, though it may or may not have much monetary value. It could be something simple, perhaps something that belonged in your family for a couple of generations. What would you do with such a special object? How would you treat it? Well, you certainly would not handle it like other common objects that you own. You would not leave it where it could be lost or stolen, nor would you put it in a place where it could be torn or broken. You would protect it. Why? Because you would wish to preserve it, to keep it, perhaps even to pass it on to someone else when you die.

Well, there is nothing more valuable in the entire world than the Bible. And no one considers it more precious than God Himself. After all, it is His own Word. He graciously gave the Scriptures to instruct and to spiritually enrich men, leading His people to salvation and edification. But it was not only intended for those who first received the Scriptures. Remember what Jesus said in John 17:20. God intended for His Word to be passed down from generation to generation, century after century, and He also intended for it to be taken to every tribe and country all around the world. In Matthew 28:19, He told His disciples, “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations.” Well, that required two things. First, the Scriptures had to be preserved in order to be passed down through the generations. God not only initially gave His inspired Word, but He Himself also determined, by His providence, to ensure that it would be preserved and kept pure in all ages. Secondly, the Scriptures would need to be translated from their original languages into the language of people all over the world.

In this lecture, we will consider these two related matters—the preservation of Scripture throughout time, and the translation of Scripture into other languages. As you know, in this first module on systematic theology, we are covering the doctrine of first principles with special attention on the doctrine of the Holy Scriptures. In the previous lecture, we considered the canonicity of Scripture. God provided in the canon a complete and perfect collection of 66 divinely inspired books, which comprise our Bibles. In this lecture, we will study what we are to believe about the preservation of that Bible, and its translation into various languages. As in our other lectures, we will look at this scripturally, doctrinally, polemically, and practically.

So first of all, we’ll introduce this scripturally. In Psalm 12:6–7, we sing, “The words of the Lord are pure words: as silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times. Thou shalt keep them, O Lord, Thou shalt preserve them from this generation for ever.” Well, this text teaches us

that God's words are perfectly pure words. Well, we saw that in an earlier lecture on the inspiration of Scripture. But we are also told that God will certainly keep and preserve these words in their purity. Notice that God Himself assumes the responsibility to protect His own Word. He alone, of course, has the power and ability to guarantee the preservation of the Scriptures in His providence. If it were merely left to the feeble and fragile hands of men, the Bible could be corrupted or lost. But the Christian has no such worries. The preservation of the Bible throughout the ages lies in the hands of their almighty Lord.

Since every word in the Bible is pure, careful attention must be given to its translation. Remember what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2:13, "Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual." Notice that God does not just provide inspired ideas or thoughts, but Spirit-given words. This is so important that in Galatians 3:16, Paul quotes from the Old Testament and builds his whole argument on the difference between a word being in the singular rather than in the plural. So it is important that regarding the original Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament that we give attention to safeguarding the details of the inspired text when translating them into other languages. Psalm 12:6-7 serves as one example of the Bible itself setting our expectations for what we are to think about the preservation of the Bible, and how we are to approach its translation. The important point is that the Scriptures themselves instruct us on these matters and not the world's ideas. We must prove from the Bible the basis for our confidence in our translations of Scripture.

Secondly, we need to consider a doctrinal overview of the preservation and translation of Scripture. And as in the other lectures, here we will expound some of the more detailed distinctions and categories that the Bible provides for us. And we'll begin by turning our attention to the Westminster Confession of Faith once again, and this time to chapter 1, paragraph 8, which covers both of the matters that we're discussing. Here's what Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 1, paragraph 8 says: "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"—authentic, authoritative—"so as, in all controversies of religion, the Church is finally to appeal unto them. But, because these original tongues are not known to all the people of God, who have right unto, and interest in the Scriptures, and are commanded, in the fear of God, to read and search them, therefore they are to be translated into the vulgar language of every nation unto which they come, that the Word of God dwelling plentifully in all, they may worship Him in an acceptable manner; and, through patience and comfort of the Scriptures, may have hope."

Well, that's a long paragraph, but it summarizes the biblical teaching on both preservation and translation. And let me highlight just a couple of the phrases that we have in that paragraph. Note especially, first of all, with regards to preservation, the doctrine of preservation, that it says, "and by His singular care and providence kept pure in all ages." God has providentially preserved the purity of the Scriptures throughout time. And secondly, with regards to translation, it says, "they are to be translated into the vulgar language"—which means the common language, or the common native vernacular—"of every nation unto which they come." So there's a helpful summary for us from the Westminster Confession.

Well, these two issues, both preservation and translation, reflect the two fundamental issues in assessing every version of the Bible. First of all, we must ensure that the underlying manuscripts,

especially the Greek New Testament manuscripts that are being used, are the correct ones, or are the authentic texts that God gave us. And secondly, we must ensure that the philosophy of translation being employed is correct and accurate. So with regards to preservation, we want to ensure that we have the authentic texts that God gave us, and with regards to translation, we are concerned with accuracy.

Let's think for a moment a little more about the preservation of Holy Scripture. Now, you'll remember, in Colossians 4:16, Paul says, "And when this epistle"—the epistle to the Colossians—"is read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans." So he understood, and the church understood, that what he was writing was Scripture, and therefore it shouldn't be restricted to just one place and a few people. It needed to be taken elsewhere; it needed, indeed, to be taken everywhere. And so the Scriptures were given to the church of Christ to be received, and then widely distributed through faithful transmission. After all, the house of God, which is the church of the living God, is the pillar and ground of the truth, as 1 Timothy 3:15 tells us.

We also know that the Bible had warned of heretics who would seek to corrupt the Scriptures. So godly scribes were vigilant to make faithful copies, careful not to change anything in the text, not even a letter, and in fact to dispose of anything that was mistaken or errant. And those copies, of course, were then copied as they went to different regions of the world—into Asia and the outer reaches of Europe, into Africa, and so on—those copies of copies were multiplied into vast numbers as they spread. And so you had, for example, the original letter that Paul wrote to the Colossians, inspired by the word of God, and that letter was then copied in, perhaps, Laodicea, and Hierapolis, and elsewhere, in Antioch, in various places; and then within that local place, copies of the copy would be made, and eventually copies of copies of copies were made, and there was a multiplication of vast numbers of the Scriptures, as they were taken to the church and the people of God throughout the ages. Well, the question that we're dealing with is, how can we be sure that pure copies have been maintained and spread down through the ages to ourselves? Well, the providential preservation of the Scriptures can be seen in a host of passages. We've already considered a couple, but think, for example, of Deuteronomy 29:29 which says, "But those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that they may do all the words of this law." We read in Isaiah 40:8, "The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand forever." Again, we sing in Psalm 119:160, "Thy word is true from the beginning: and every one of thy righteous judgments endureth forever." Well, we turn to the New Testament and find the same thing. Jesus is speaking at the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5:18, and He says, "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." And, of course, this must be the case, because how could the believer be called to believe and obey all the words of Scripture if not all the words of Scripture were preserved? And so we are confident that it was kept pure in every age by the Lord, and not lost to His beloved church.

Now, turning our attention to the translation of Scripture. Given our doctrine of Scripture, all that we've learned in these lectures, accuracy becomes absolutely essential in translating the Bible. We learned about the verbal plenary inspiration of Scripture—that every word and all of the words come to us from the Holy Spirit, and that therefore they're inerrant—without error, and that they're infallible. And so for us the question is, when we take those Scriptures—Old Testament Hebrew, New Testament Greek—and we translate them into Spanish or Chinese or English or German, whatever the language may be, the question is, what is equivalent to what the author wrote? But notice, the question is not, How would our readers understand it? The focus is on the text, not the reader. What does the text say? And this is important, because the Scriptures may be taken, for ex-

ample, to a country where there are no lambs, where there aren't any sheep, and yet you know that the word "lamb" is in the Bible, both Old and New Testaments. Well, you can imagine a translator might say, "Well, there's no lambs, no sheep in this country, but they have pigs and they're familiar with pigs and they understand what a pig is, so we'll translate the word, not 'sheep' or 'lamb,' but we'll translate it 'pig'." What are they doing? They're thinking in terms of the reader, not the text. Well, you know that in this case, that would be disastrous; it would be disastrous theologically, because the lamb has significance, as the Old Testament sacrifice, and Christ is "the Lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world." And you know that in the Old Testament, under the ceremonial laws of Old Testament Israel, the pig was actually an unclean animal; it was one that was to be set aside, that they were prohibited from having contact with. And so if you translated it "pig," you would end up with all sorts of confusion. No, what should be done is translate it according to what the text says, and then explain to people what the text means. First, we're given an accurate translation, and then we need faithful teaching of what that text—what the Bible—actually means. So you can see the importance of accuracy of translation followed by faithful teaching, not taking teaching and then putting it into, as it were, the translation itself. That would be altering the Word of God, which is a problem.

Well, thirdly, we must consider and answer some of the primary arguments which attack the providential preservation and the accurate translation of Holy Scripture. This is considering the doctrine polemically, and this will ensure that we are equipped to refute those errors that come up, and to hold fast to the truth of Scripture.

The very first recorded words of Satan in the Bible are these, "Yea, hath God said." Four words, "Yea, hath God said." The devil has continued to use the same foolish tactics throughout the ages to attack and undermine the Scriptures. Now, he can do so by either seeking to take away the Bible, or by undermining the believer's confidence in the Bible, which is the Word of God. Well, attacks against the providential preservation of Scripture arose in the nineteenth century, and persist to the present day. These attacks aim at undermining the confidence of God's people. What happened? Well, in the nineteenth century, especially in the West, there were a number of spiritual departures from Scripture, and it was during that era that someone discovered some Greek New Testament manuscripts in a burn barrel. And they looked at these and determined that they were, allegedly, older than the manuscripts that were commonly used in making translations. Not only were they older, they were viewed as manuscripts that had been lost for fourteen centuries and had then just been rediscovered. And so there was a great deal of excitement about this—a great deal of excitement—and two schools of thought arose. One was that the supposedly oldest manuscripts were the ones that were the most authentic, even though there were just a tiny few of them, like the ones I've just mentioned. On the other side, you had the position that had been maintained for a long time that where there were the most manuscripts, we should have greater confidence. Well, the modern movement that emerged from that nineteenth-century incident, has led to publishing translations, at least in the English language, that are based on Greek manuscripts that follow the idea of using these very few, allegedly old, manuscripts. But think about what we've just learned in this lecture. If portions of the Scripture were missing for fourteen centuries, then the church didn't have the authentic text during that period, which would be contrary to what the Bible teaches us about the preservation of Scripture. God has determined that He will keep it pure in all ages, and He'll preserve it for His church throughout the ages. So it is impossible that those texts would be authentic if they were missing for fourteen centuries. You might also ask yourself the question, "Why would something so old not be worn out?" And the reason is because it was not used. The

reliable texts would be the ones that were used over and over and over again, for translation and for copying. And those that were known to be less reliable would be set aside and not used, and thus not worn out. You might also ask yourself the question, “Why were there so few?” You would expect that if these were the most reliable manuscripts, that there would be tons of them—that there would be many, many, many of them. Well, that’s a good point. In fact, we should believe, we should conclude, that the more reliable texts are found in multitudinous proportions, found in many, many, many, many copies.

You’ll also note that, with regards to this, the issue of the region from which these manuscripts came—these questionable manuscripts that are being pawned off or being promoted as the best. They came from North Africa. And in the ancient church, North Africa was an area where there was a lot of difficulty with heresy, like the Arians who taught that Jesus was only a man, and that He was not God. And so take for an interesting example, 1 Timothy 3:16. That text says, “And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh.” “God was manifest in the flesh.” Now, in 97% of the manuscripts, we have the word “God,” but in a tiny few of these Egyptian manuscripts, that is missing. Instead it just says “He is manifest;” they supply the pronoun. And that’s the text that’s being used by many modern scholars. Well, no surprise there, is it? It came from a region that was denying that Jesus was God manifest in the flesh. And so the point here is that these, some of these modern notions are a way in which the devil can come in and begin to disturb and unsettle the Lord’s people, and their confidence of whether the Bible that we’ve had and has been had through the ages is actually His true Word. But what authority guides us in this question? The answer is Scripture alone guides us. And the Bible teaches us the doctrine of providential preservation.

Now secondly, there is the other matter we’ve been considering, regarding translation. And there are two schools regarding translation. One focuses on accuracy, the other focuses on readability—how readable it is. And, in contrast to the emphasis on the content of the original Scriptures, saying, in other words, what the text says by how the author wrote it, there are others that have begun to say that we should insist on translating the Scripture thought by thought, not word by word. Well, this is false, and this incorrect view is focusing on the response of the reader, not focusing on the text of Scripture. So they emphasize things like, “How would we say it? How would we say this?” Well, this contradicts the verbal plenary inspiration of Scripture, which we know from the Bible, as we saw in 1 Corinthians 2:13, that this inspiration applies to the words of Scripture, not just to the thoughts or intentions. And so the translator must follow the inspired words of the text, and then leave the interpretation of those words to others, to the reader, or to a pastor who’s preaching, and so on. To do otherwise, to view interpretation as Scripture, would be another of the errors of the Roman Catholic Church. And so we need to be careful that this notion that some modern translators are employing, of not sticking with accuracy to the words of Scripture and translating them accordingly, but rather being a little more fluid, a little more loose, and translating the idea of what the passage is saying—that is something that needs to be resisted because of what the Bible teaches us about itself. So there are problems both with regards to preservation and translation that we should be alert to.

But fourthly, we need to consider this practically. And in considering the preservation and translation of Scripture, we can highlight some implications for ourselves. First of all, the believer should know that he has good grounds for complete confidence that he has the very Word of God in faithful translations of the Scriptures. We can take up our Bibles, faithful translations of our Bible, and say, “This is indeed the very Word of God.” What does that do? That deepens faith, and

it deepens love, and it even deepens our delight in the Scriptures. We should be thankful to God that He has been pleased to bring us His word in our own languages, recognizing that without it, we would be walking in darkness and ignorance of God's special revelation and the good news of Christ the Savior.

Secondly, these doctrines provide biblical conviction about how men handle the Bible. These doctrines control how we translate the Scriptures into various languages, and provide us with discernment for assessing those translations, whether they're especially good, or perhaps not. But it also fuels the prayers of God's people. It fuels our prayers and our support and our desire to see faithful translations of the Scripture produced and taken to every people in every language throughout the whole world.

Thirdly, we think about what we love, even the details that delight us. That's true in normal life. How much more when it comes to the Bible? We should give careful attention to every word and detail of the Scriptures, and we can do so by way of meditation. Again, we sing in Psalm 119:97, "Oh, how love I thy law! It is my meditation all the day." Notice the words of Joshua, in Joshua 1:8, "This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein." And so we're to be meditating with love upon this inspired Word that God has given to us.

In addition to meditation, something else that goes hand in hand with that is our memorization of Scripture. We are to lay up the Scriptures in our heart and our mind with careful accuracy. Remember the words of David again, in Psalm 119:11, "Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee." So in your memorization of the Scriptures, which is very important, you need to be careful that you're memorizing it accurately. One of the things that I've done with my own children is, when I'm reviewing with them passages of Scripture that they have memorized, verses or perhaps a chapter or more at times, I ensure that every letter is right. And they appreciate that. But if they make a mistake, then I explain to them that, "You've said it wrong, and now we need to practice it even more the right way." And so I'll have them repeat it the correct way, maybe three or four, sometimes more times than that, in order to ingrain in their head each and every letter, each and every word, so that the word that they're hiding in their heart is, in fact, the inspired word that God has given to us. And you may find that helpful yourself.

Well in this lecture, we considered the preservation and translation of the Scriptures, demonstrating the importance of both having the authentic text that God has given, and an accurate translation of that text. In the next lecture, we will turn our attention to the interpretation of the Scriptures. How do we rightly understand the meaning of what is written in the Bible?