

Verbal Inspiration and the Variant Readings

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Irresponsible advertising, designed more to sell books than to glorify God, has often urged the purchase of new Bible translations by implying that the discovery of more ancient manuscripts of the Holy Scriptures have so radically altered the message of the Bible that the KJV is out of date because of its content rather than because of its archaic language. More sober and honest scholarship has, however, admitted that the ancient manuscripts that have come into use since 1611 have actually altered the text very little. On the other hand, so-called conservative scholarship has often implied that the more recently discovered manuscripts have changed the meaning of the text to such a degree that a Christian risks his faith by departing from the *Textus Receptus* (TR), which underlies the King James Version.

There was a time when the whole discussion of the variant readings could be confined to the seminary classroom with perhaps an occasional reference to the problem at pastoral conferences. Our laymen quite generally needed to concern themselves very little with the whole question of the variations in the Biblical manuscripts.

This situation has, however, changed radically in the past few years. This change has taken place as a result of the increasing use of the new Bible translations.

But the new versions of the Bible are not the only cause of this renewed interest in the variant readings on the part of our pastors and awakened concern on the part of our laymen. The variant readings have become one of the principal weapons in the arsenal of those who seek to undermine the full inerrancy and the verbal inspiration of the Holy Scriptures. Over and over, almost to the point of nausea, we are told that verbal inspiration has become an obsolete concept because we do not have exact verbatim copies of the original text, and that it is ridiculous to speak of an inerrant Bible at a time when everybody knows that the manuscripts we have contain errors by which the original text of the autographa has become corrupt. Such arguments may occasionally shake the faith of both pastor and people.

We say both pastor and people. Our laymen are not the only ones who are troubled by the variations from the King James text. Several pastors who have left or been suspended from the fellowship of the WELS out of mistaken zeal for the truth (and for their zeal they might be commended even while we may bemoan their lack of understanding) have attacked all the existing modern English translations including even Beck and the NASB as a “devil’s brew” of truth and error. In many cases their attacks on the modern versions have concentrated on missing words and phrases, and the charge has been leveled that the truth of God has thereby been obscured and vitiated.

It is true that in our congregational work it will be especially the new translations that will force us to deal with the problem. Our laymen, who know the KJV well, in reading the new translations will notice that in some cases familiar passages not only lack certain phrases but that occasionally these passages are omitted completely.

Where the new Bible versions (and we would do well not to call them “new Bibles”) have come into use, it is usually not long before some parishioner asks why the conclusion of the Lord’s Prayer is missing in his new Bible. What we answer in reply to such questions can be important not only for them, but it has a bearing on the whole doctrinal controversy in regard to the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture that is shaking the Lutheran Church in our time. We can close our minds to all the facts and simply insist that all the new Bibles are a fraud perpetrated by the devil, or we can face up to the issue and give an answer that we can defend before God and our own conscience.

Conservative, orthodox Lutheranism has nothing to fear from the variant readings. These variations in the Greek and Hebrew text will not take our Bible away from us nor compel us to retreat from the doctrine we have proclaimed.

But our people deserve an answer to their questions, and we should be prepared to give them a reply that will not shake or undermine their faith in the reliability and trustworthiness of all the words and promises of

God in the Holy Bible. It is, however, not only our laymen who need such an answer. It may well be that some inexperienced young pastor who has heard only the other side during his seminary days may be won for orthodox, conservative Lutheranism if we can give him an honest answer to his doubts.

I. Verbal Inspiration and the Variant Readings

It is, of course, almost impossible to separate the question of the variant readings from the doctrine of verbal inspiration. It may be of some value in helping us to come to clarity about this matter if we review some of the details of this doctrine especially as it relates to the form in which the Word of God has come to us. We have only copies of the autographs, or better said, copies of copies of the autographs. Besides, our people in almost all cases know the Word of God only in translation. In our own devotional reading, especially in our family circle, we pastors also use the English versions. I suppose that for most of us it is true that when we read the original text, we are so distracted by questions of grammar and vocabulary that a real devotional reading of the Greek or Hebrew text becomes very difficult. We use the original only to satisfy ourselves that the English translation correctly reproduces the meaning of the passage in question, or to discover linguistic overtones that may be missing in the translation.

When we say, then, that only the original autographs are verbally inspired, does this mean that we do not have the Word of God in the translations we employ in our everyday use of the Bible? This is a question which is often asked when the inspiration of the autographs is discussed. While this is not the question with which we propose to deal here, it is nevertheless a related question. It is safe to say that when the question of the variant readings becomes more common, we will be faced with a similar problem, namely, "If so many changes in wording in the text have taken place, can we still say that we have the Word of God in its truth and purity?" There are people who are sincerely troubled by such questions, and there are others who delight in asking them because they seem to find satisfaction in arousing doubt about long-cherished beliefs.

But again we ought to know what to say when such questions are asked. We may not be able to satisfy everyone, but we can at least try to give an answer that will be helpful to those who earnestly search for the truth. We may take for granted that for the readers of the *Quarterly* it will not be necessary to review the basic Biblical doctrine concerning verbal inspiration. We know that the words of the Bible written by the holy men of God are truly the words of God, which were not learned from human wisdom but which were taught by the Holy Ghost, so that spiritually revealed truths were communicated to men in spiritually taught words (I Cor 2:13).

Nevertheless, while the words of the Bible are important, we ought to remember that the words of the Bible are *words*, not just vocables. *Words* are sounds with meanings attached to them, and it is the divinely intended meaning communicated through the divinely taught words that is important.

The dogmaticians have always made a distinction between the matter (outward form) and form (essence) of the Word of God. While it is true that the Word of God is made up of words set down in a grammatical sentence structure, yet the form or essence of the Word of God is not found in the words as such, but rather in the thought expressed by those words. In fact, it is possible that certain words in one context express a divine truth while in another context exactly the same words may be a diabolic lie. When we gather as a group of Christians on the basis of the presupposition of a common faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, we may very correctly say that we are all children of God. When those very same words, "We are all the children of God," are spoken in the context of a Christ-denying lodge, they are not the Word of God. They are not even true. In fact, in that context they are a diabolic false doctrine that has undoubtedly sent many a soul to hell.

That does not mean that the words of Scripture may ever be downgraded. They are truly the words of God. But we must be careful that we never make the words as such bear a weight that they were never meant to bear. While it is certainly true that completely different words would communicate completely different thoughts, yet it is also true that there may at times be a considerable variation in the words without creating a significant variation in thought. For example, the sentence, "We had a great deal of precipitation today," is a sentence which is vaguer but still expresses the same thought as the sentence, "we had a great deal of rain

today.” And yet the two sentences may mean exactly the same thing if they were spoken in the context of a hot day in August, for even then one would expect that some reference might be made to hail if the precipitation did not come down in the form of rain. At the same time we would all grant that there would be many situations in which it would be of little practical advantage to know whether the precipitation came down in the form of hail, rain, snow, or sleet. On the other hand, there might be cases where the difference would be of decisive significance, and a snowfall on a hot day in August would be a miracle.

The Bible itself teaches us that there are many different ways of saying the same thing. We might, for example, think of the many passages on which we base our doctrine of universal depravity. On the basis of those passages we have perhaps all said at one time or another, “The Bible says that all men are sinners.” There is perhaps not one of us who would be inclined to contradict that statement, in spite of our knowledge that there is not one Bible passage that says that precisely in those exact words. It should therefore be obvious that variations in wording will not necessarily create a radical change in the Biblical message. In fact, it is entirely possible for variations in wording to occur without any discernible change in meaning.

It is, of course, also true that there are cases where a very slight change, even in the form of a single word, may have a significant effect on the message which is to be conveyed. But this is by no means always true.

This principle, which asserts that verbal inspiration does not mean that the truth of God can be expressed in only one set of words arranged in one grammatical form, is an important consideration if we are not to be disturbed by the variant readings. Those who are troubled by the variant readings would surely be pleasantly surprised if they would only ask themselves, “How much difference in meaning does this variant really introduce into this text?”

Closely related to this principle is the truth that verbal inspiration does not mean that every word of the Bible is as precise and as definite as every other word. But whether the words are exact and precise, or general and somewhat vague, they are all words of God. This fact is often confused with the clarity of Scripture, and we often in such cases, speak of unclear passages. It would perhaps be closer to the truth if we would instead say that the wording of certain passages is not as precise in some cases as in others, but that the passage is always sufficiently clear to convey the message which God intends to convey in this particular context.

For example, the words of the Lord Jesus, “The Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life as a ransom for many,” has often been misused in the interest of the Calvinistic doctrine of limited atonement. And we will have to admit that the word “many” is not precise and comprehensive enough to serve as evidence for our doctrine of universal atonement. If this wording were found in every case in which the beneficiaries of the saving work of Christ are under consideration, the word “many” could be understood in the Calvinistic sense, yet it would not need even then to be understood in that way. We would simply not know how many men have been redeemed by the death of the Savior. It might be as little as ten or as many as the sand on the seashore and more. In fact, it could very easily be all the people who have ever lived and will ever live. That would certainly be “many.” This passage surely demonstrates beyond all doubt that a word may be an inspired word of God and yet not be precise and exact, but nevertheless as a word of God it expresses the thought that God wanted to communicate in that situation, and in that sense it is a clear word.

As additional illustrations of the same principle we might cite cases of hyperbole in the Scriptures. When it is said, for example, that “Jerusalem, and *all* Judea, and *all* the region round about Jordan” went out to hear the preaching of John the Baptist, it would surely be a mistake to say that the word “all” in this case means every single individual who lived in the areas mentioned. And when Luke says that when Jesus spoke in the synagog in Capernaum, they “*all* bare Him witness and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of His mouth,” this may really mean no more than we would convey by saying, “Everybody was surprised.” Not much depends on the precise meaning of the word “all” in this case, and it would surely again be a mistake to conclude that all those who were present, including the babes in arms, expressed the thoughts and the surprise to which Luke alludes. Yet in another context we may insist that the word “all” means precisely this, and we can demonstrate by the context that it has this meaning.

The same might be said about the use of round numbers in the Bible. For example, in the twelfth chapter of the second book of Moses we are told that 600,000 men, besides women and children, left Egypt in the exodus (Ex 12:37). A year later, at the time of the census, we are told that there were 603,550 men above the age of twenty in Israel's encampment at Mt. Sinai. Now it may be argued that the number of men of military age increased by that amount between the exodus and the census, but is it not also possible that the figure given in the earlier chapter is a round number, and even based on the later census figure? Even the census figure may well be a round number of sorts, for in the individual census figures given for each of the tribes, in every case except one, the numbers are given in what seems to be the nearest hundred. In the one exception we are told that Gad numbered 45,650. None of the census figures contain units and only one contains tens. This fact does not by any means justify the statement that the number 600,000 is "grossly exaggerated," but we ought not to insist that we have here precise and exact figures, that are correct to the decimal point. They are as precise as they need to be to convey the message that God wants to communicate. It perhaps ought to be said emphatically once more that this does not give us the right to adjust the figures to suit our fancy. This phenomenon has been used to discredit the inerrancy of the Bible. But it ought to be recognized by all of us that when the Bible says that 600,000 men left Egypt there might conceivably have been 601,472 just as well as 599,233, and the man who says that the use of round figures gives us a right to say that the figures are "considerably beefed up" is not operating with round figures but is charging the Bible with error.

Before we consider the bearing of the variant readings on the message of the Bible we need to remember also that the doctrine of verbal inspiration does not "flatten out" the words of Scripture, as is so often charged. It is, of course, true that our doctrine of verbal plenary inspiration means that every word of the original manuscripts is a word of God, and therefore each word deserves our respect as a word of God. Dr. Luther once said that if God would speak to us and say nothing but "La, la, la, la," we ought still to listen to it as the most wonderful thing that we had ever heard.

But, nevertheless, the verbal inspiration of all the words of the Bible does not mean that every single word is of equal importance with every other word. And in translating, for example, we may safely ignore many a $\mu\acute{\epsilon}\nu$ and $\delta\acute{\epsilon}$ of the Greek text. Whole sentences are not as significant as every other sentence. And we may correctly say that there are whole books of the Bible which are not as important as other books. There is a sense in which Luther was absolutely right when he called James a "right strawy epistle." That does not mean that James is worthless. Luther did not believe that either, for he commends the book very highly. James is still far more important than the *Shepherd of Hermas*, or the *First Epistle of Clement*, or the *Epistle of Barnabas*. These are right chaffy epistles in comparison to James, just as James is a strawy epistle in comparison to Romans.

Finally, it should also be noted that verbal inspiration does not mean that all the details associated with an event recorded in Scripture are given in the account. A doctrine of verbal plenary inspiration which is truly drawn from the Bible will recognize that much was said and done by the Lord Jesus and the apostles and prophets which did not become part of the inspired record. The Bible itself tells us that, for John says that it is his opinion that if all the words and deeds of Jesus were to be recorded, there would not be enough room in the whole world to contain the books that should be written.

And even when the words and deeds of the Lord Jesus, the patriarchs, the prophets and the apostles are recorded, verbal inspiration does not mean that we have a complete and detailed report of what happened. All we can say is that we have a correct and adequate report in which the Holy Ghost gives us His own version of what was said and done.

A comparison of the same account in several of the Gospels will demonstrate very quickly that this is the case. This does not mean, however, as some have concluded, that Jesus did not say what is attributed to Him in the Gospels. It may well be that He did not use the exact words that are preserved for us, but He really did express the thoughts which are conveyed by the words in which the Holy Ghost chose to preserve those thoughts for us. His preaching may be summarized, but what we have is a correct summary. Different words, even a different language, may be used than He used, but the words will still correctly reflect the meaning of His original statements. Once we understand that clearly, we will be done for all time with the foolish argument of some men who consider themselves to be wise and who say that we cannot lay too much stress on the copula

in the words of institution in the doctrine of the Lord's Supper, for Jesus used Aramaic, and Aramaic would not use the copula.

If we remember then

1. that the essence of the Word of God is to be sought in the meaning of the words of the Bible;
2. that verbal inspiration does not mean that the truth can be expressed in only one way;
3. that verbal inspiration does not mean that all the words are always as precise as we might wish them to be;
4. that verbal inspiration does not mean that all the words are of equal importance in conveying the message; and
5. that verbal inspiration does not mean that the reports as we have them are never summarized, truncated, or restated,

then the problem of the variant readings will be of far less consequence or significance.

II. The Effect of the Variant Readings on the Doctrine of Scripture

As we have already noted, even our laymen are by this time aware that there are many variations in the wording of the various manuscripts in which the Word of God has been preserved for us from ancient times. A careful reading of the margin and text of the King James Bible would have accustomed them to this idea long ago. For example, in John 8:6, the KJV says that Jesus wrote with His finger on the ground *as though He heard them not* (italics in the original). In this passage the King James Version used italics to indicate that these last six words are found in a comparatively few manuscripts. In the same version at Acts 25:6, where the text says, that Paul "tarried among them more than ten days," the margin calls attention to this that "some copies read, 'No more than eight or ten days.'"

While the problem would not be completely unknown, therefore, to a careful reader of the AV, yet there is no doubt that frequent discussion of the problem has become necessary because of the adoption of the new translations and because of the use that has been made of the variants by those theologians who have sought to discredit the doctrine of verbal inspiration and inerrancy.

We are all aware that for several thousand years the Biblical books had to be copied by hand. The printing press was not invented until less than a hundred years before the Reformation. Up to that time errors that inadvertently crept into the text could not be corrected by proof readers before the final printing. The first copy was also the published copy. There was a proof reading of sorts and the result is seen in the many manuscripts in which corrections are made, often by different hands, and scholars are able to identify the various correctors by such criteria as handwriting, type of ink, and so forth. Efforts were also made to compare the copy with the original. As late as 300 A.D. one of the bishops of Alexandria, in discussing a textual problem in John's Gospel, appealed to what he called "the copy itself that was written by the hand of the evangelist, which, by the divine grace, has been preserved in the most holy church of Ephesus, and is there adored by the faithful."¹

The variant readings ought really to come to no one as a surprise. Anyone who has ever tried to copy pages of material either by hand or typewriter knows how difficult it is to avoid all errors in transcription. Such errors have also crept into the Bible manuscripts, as we all know. But when we read that there are as many as 400,000 such copyists' errors in the New Testament alone, that stupendous figure gives the impression that scarcely anything can be left that can be accepted with any kind of certainty.

However, when these 400,000 variants are divided among the thousands of manuscript copies, it will be seen that the situation is not nearly as serious as it may appear at first glance. Anyone who has done any proof

¹ *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Edinburgh ed.) VI, 282.

reading knows that it is not unusual to find ten printing errors on one galley sheet, and most of these errors can be corrected with confidence even without any reference to the original copy.

In fact, if we think of the variant readings in terms of printing errors in our English Bibles, we will see the whole problem in much clearer perspective. Many of these errors in the English text we do not even notice, because the sense is crystal clear or at least no false doctrine is introduced even if a word is misspelled or if a different word is substituted. The same is true of many of the variant readings in the original text. A great many of the variant readings do not change the meaning of the text in the slightest. It is a rare variant that changes the meaning of the text appreciably. And even if an occasional variant does make a disturbing alteration in the sense of the text, the manuscript evidence is so clear that the correct wording is undisputed.

A few examples will help us see the true nature of the problem. Many times when phrases or whole sentences are missing from some familiar story, the same phrase or sentence will be found elsewhere in the text. In our KJV, Matthew 18:11, for example, reads, "The Son of man is come to save that which was lost." The NASB prints these words in brackets with the marginal note, "Most ancient mss. omit this verse." The NIV omits the verse from the text, but has a footnote which says "Some mss. add verse 11: The Son of Man came to save what was lost." We will probably never be able to decide for certain whether Matthew really included this verse or not when he wrote his Gospel.

But even if Matthew did not write these words, there is first of all no question that the addition of these words does not add anything to the truth which God has made known to us in the Bible, and by the omission of these words we lose nothing of the truth. For the pastor who knows his Bible well knows that these same words are found in a slightly different form in Luke 19:10, where that evangelist writes, "The Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which was lost." Here there is no textual problem, for all the manuscripts have the words in this passage. It is interesting to note also that while most of the manuscripts of Matthew have the words, "The Son of Man is come to save that which was lost," a number of late cursive copies of Matthew and quite a few lectionaries at Matthew 18:11 have exactly the same words as Luke's Gospel, "The Son of man is come *to seek and* to save that which was lost." A similar example will be found at Matthew 23:14 (cp. Mk 12:40; Lk 20:47—Note also: Matthew has a tendency to arrange in groups of five, seven, and ten. If we adopt the TR here, we get a group of eight "woes.").

Such variations in wording we find in the Gospels even when there are no variant readings involved. All three Synoptic Gospels give us a rather detailed account of a day's activity of Jesus in Capernaum, early in His Galilean ministry. Toward the conclusion of the story we are told about large numbers of people who were brought to Him for healing. Matthew says that this happened "when evening was coming on." Luke says that it took place "while the sun was setting." Mark's Gospel reads, "When evening was coming on and the sun began to go down." This, by the way, is also an interesting example to show how the same thought can be expressed, and expressed correctly, in two different ways. And many of the variant readings do exactly this same thing.

In fact, some of the variant readings introduce synonyms that are of use in discussing certain doctrinal questions. Mark tells us, for example, that when the Pharisees come from the market, they do not eat unless they first wash (Mk 7:4). The Greek word for "wash" here in the TR is βαπτίζονται. An interesting variant is found in both Sinaiticus and Vaticanus which here read ραντίζονται which means "sprinkle," a reading which calls our attention to the fact that many OT baptisms were by sprinkling, as we are clearly told in Numbers 19.

In connection with the doctrine of baptism, attention might also be called to Acts 8:37. This verse is probably the strongest Biblical argument that Baptists have for their doctrine of "believer baptism." In verse 36, the eunuch of Ethiopia asks Philip whether he can be baptized, and verse 37 then reads, in the KJV, "And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." The NASB, which appears in some cases to show a slight Baptist bias, omits this verse in the text but prints it in the margin with the comment, "Late mss. insert verse 37." The NIV does the same, but says, "Some mss. add verse 37." It is perhaps safe to say that if the verse were not in the KJV, it would very likely be completely ignored in more modern translations, for there simply can be no doubt that the verse was not in the original verbally inspired text. No ancient manuscript has this verse and it would seem that it got into the TR only by accident. Practically the whole Byzantine text tradition, which is for all practical purposes the source of

the TR, does not have this verse. Only one important uncial from that tradition, E, has the verse, and even there the wording is very significantly different from that of the KJV. It does not read, “If you believe with all your heart, it is permitted (to be baptized)”, but rather, “If you believe with all your heart, you will be saved.” Only very few very late manuscripts have the verse, and if I were editing the NASB and the NIV, this is the way I would introduce the footnote. While the passage as it stands in the KJV can not bear the weight which Baptists sometimes place on it, yet there is no doubt in my mind that here the modern versions have rendered a service by dropping the verse out of the text. The *Living Bible*, with its unwarranted Baptist and Calvinistic alterations of the text, is one of the few modern versions that tries to salvage something of the verse, and it does so with an inexact footnote which tells us that many ancient mss. omit verse 37 in whole or in part. The fact is that all truly ancient manuscripts omit it entirely, and that almost all very late manuscripts omit it in whole or in part.

While many of the modern English translations are justly censured for a few mistranslations, yet we do them an injustice and our people a disservice when we attack them on the basis of most of their changes and omissions which are based on variant readings, concerning many of which no man living is really competent to render final judgment. We may not like some of the omissions, and we may not agree with the importance that is assigned to Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, and the Chester Beatty papyri, but we cannot deny that these are ancient manuscripts and that they could be correct in many places.

We run a grave risk of playing into the hands of Bible-doubting churchmen if we refuse to take the variant readings seriously or to deal with them honestly. We run an even greater risk of placing ourselves in an indefensible position when we imply or openly state that the omission of certain words or phrases, or the adoption of variants from the TR changes the doctrine of the Bible. This is simply not true.

For example, in a mimeographed attack on all existing modern English translations offered on a Lutheran radio program, the statement is made that when the NASB omits the word “first-born” in Matthew 1:25, it has removed one of the “guarantees” of the virgin birth. There is textual justification for omitting the word in this passage. On the other hand, apparently without exception all the manuscripts contain the word in Luke 2:7. In fact, Luke’s phrase is identical with the wording found in most of the manuscripts of Matthew that have the Byzantine text. Since Luke’s story of the birth of Christ was very likely the standard pericope for Christmas day from ancient times, Luke’s phrase, “She brought forth her first-born son,” was undoubtedly known by heart by all the copyists, and it is not at all surprising that it found its way into Matthew’s account.

It would be wrong to accuse the modern versions of modernistic bias against the word, for I know of no modern version, not even the RSV or the NEB or Goodspeed, which omits the word in its translation of Luke. And even if the word is omitted in Matthew, this has no bearing on the virgin birth, for virginity can be lost without any child being born. The modernistic argument that the Jews considered a woman to be a virgin until she had given birth to a child simply cannot be substantiated, and those who say that the word “first-born” “guarantees” the virgin birth are simply playing into the hands of modernistic opponents of Mary’s purity. The fact is that the word “first-born” does not “guarantee” the virgin birth. That doctrine rests on far firmer grounds than this.

In the same document, much is made of the omission of the word “Lord” in Matthew’s account of the resurrection. Where the King James Version has, “Come, see the place where the Lord lay,” most of the modern versions have, “Come, see the place where He lay.” This omission is cited as proof that the modern versions attack the deity of Christ. While it is true that some of the modern versions surely do not give the Lord Jesus the honor and the glow to which He is entitled, yet there is no modern version which says that Jesus is not God. While we may lose a passage here or there which is supportive of the doctrine of the deity of our Lord, and while we may justly object to some modern versions because of this, yet it ought to be said, in order to keep everything in proper perspective, that those who deny the deity of Christ will find little to support, in fact they will find nothing to support, their point of view in most of the modern versions, except the version of the Jehovah’s Witnesses.

An examination of the facts will show how unjustified some of the more radical statements about the modern translations sometimes are. The NASB, for example, is one of the versions that omits the word “Lord” in Matthew 28:6. The facts are that Matthew uses the word “Lord” in reference to Jesus 37 times. The NASB

retains 34 of these. One of them it changes to “Sir” (which is not altogether wrong, even if we may consider it unjustified to do this in this passage (Mt 8:6), especially since the very same word in the mouth of the same man is translated “Lord” two verses later.) It omits the word in two places, both times on the basis of what could be considered by many to be valid textual evidence. To say that this is a “denial” of the deity of Christ makes the textual variations far more important than they are. What are we going to do with the evangelist Mark, who also omits the word “Lord” in his account and says, “Behold the place where they laid Him.” Are we going to say that Mark was not quite as sure of the deity of Christ as Matthew was? It reminds me very much of the unwarranted argumentation of modernistic theologians who say that the Gospel writers disagreed in their views about the virgin birth because Mark and John do not mention it. This example is just another indication that the variants do not change the doctrine.

Now it is true that it may sometimes seem that certain variants lend support to false doctrinal views. In the document alluded to several times, the modern English translations are soundly castigated because they adopt the reading *αὐδοκίας*, in Luke 2:14. This reading is characterized as being “synergistic.” Now it is true that it could be understood in a synergistic way, if the word is separated from the whole context of the Bible. But it is also true that the phrase, “men of good will,” even if it is translated in this manner, is not necessarily synergistic. Out of context it could mean men who are characterized by good will. But it could also mean men who are the objects of good will. “Children of wrath” in Ephesians 2 are not angry children, but children who are the objects of God’s wrath. It is interesting to note that the Dead Sea Scrolls contain the phrase which Delitzsch used in his Hebrew translation of Luke 2:14, *אֲנָשֵׁי רְצוֹנוֹ*, “men of His good pleasure,” or “men of His good will.”² If the genitive is the correct reading, it is such a Hebraistic genitive. It would have to be translated in this way in the context of the Bible, which rejects all synergism.

Yet, when most of the modern translations reproduce the Hebraistic genitive very correctly, e.g. “for men on whom *His* favor rests” (NEB), then the author of the cited document writes, “NOTE: The word “He”, “His”, “Him” is not within a thousand miles of any Greek text. To *add* these words is an attempt to wiggle around the false teaching *demand*ed (my emphasis) by their genitive “of good will.” The fact is that the false teaching is not demanded by this reading. What will a man who operates with such logic do when he is confronted with such a passage as “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,” when there is no textual variant from the TR that he can blame for it?

It is, however, true that there are some textual variants that are doctrinally incorrect. It is not easy to find an example of this because there are so few. But luckily there is one in the very first chapter of the New Testament, where a few manuscripts read, “Joseph begat Jesus.” Now this *is* a denial of the virgin birth. According to the textual apparatus in the United Bible Societies text only one very late uncial and a few other scattered witnesses give this reading. This is a typical example of how a reading which would create a doctrinal difficulty is so poorly attested that no fair-minded person could by the wildest stretch of the imagination conclude that this was the original wording set down by the apostle. Of the modern versions which I examined for this essay, only one, that of Moffatt, takes this reading seriously. Even the RSV, in its later editions, has removed the objectionable footnote, which says that this is the wording of “other ancient authorities.”

The conclusion to which we may come is this, that the more one studies the variant readings, the less formidable the whole problem becomes.

Summary

In summary we may say that, in spite of all claims to the contrary, the variant readings do not make the doctrine of verbal inspiration a mere academic question, because we do not have the autographs.

The doctrine of verbal inspiration remains of crucial importance in spite of all variations in our present text. To see that this is so one need only consider where we would stand if we had perfect copies of an erring text which contains nothing more than man’s witness to and record of revelation. Perfect copies of such a

² Wm. La Sor, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), p 237.

document would still not bring us the *truth*, they would still not be the inerrant Word of God, worthy of our trust in everything that it says. The most painstaking textual criticism of imperfect copies of such a document would bring us closer only to more human opinions.

But if the original text is really verbally inspired and inerrant, then we have a firm foundation for our faith in the Lord Jesus, for, after all, faith in Jesus is also faith in the *words* and *promises* of God. The most scholarly textual criticism helps to make us certain that for most of the text we have so many agreeing witnesses that there can be no doubt whatever that we have the inspired and inerrant words of the autographs.

Where some doubt exists about the exact words, the variations are usually of such a nature that they do not change the meaning of the inspired message in any perceptible way. After all, in a Christian context, it does not really make any difference whether we say the the *Lord* died for us, or the *Lord Jesus* died for us, or the *Lord Jesus Christ* died for us, *Jesus* died for us, or *Christ* died for us, or *Jesus Christ* died for us, or *Christ Jesus* died for us, or *He* died for us. Most of the variants are of such a nature.

Of course, if we are dealing with someone who says that Christ is risen but that Jesus is dead and stayed dead, such variations may be significant, but you may be sure that anyone who confesses such a faith, or such a lack of faith, will not be persuaded if all the copies of Scripture in exactly the same words say what he denies. Our problem with Bible-doubting Lutherans does not rest on the variant readings, but with their denial of what is plainly said in Scripture in words which the variant readings do not call into question. For example, there are 42 passages in the NT which refer to Moses as the author of the Pentateuch. In only one of these 42 passages (Jn 8:5) is the name of Moses omitted in any manuscript listed in Nestle's critical apparatus.

Where words are missing from some manuscripts and added in others, we may not be certain that these words were part of the autographs, but one thing is still certain. Even if we would grant that the missing words are not verbally inspired, because they were not part of the autographs, we will not need to admit that the added words, if they are added in any significant number of otherwise reliable manuscripts, are untrue or that they really add anything to the Word of God. The *comma Johanneum* is a case in point. The words, "There are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost, and these three are one," are found in not one single important manuscript nor in a single ancient version except the Vulgate. The Byzantine tradition, at least in all its early development, knows nothing of this passage. Every major manuscript family omits it. But all of us recognize that the statement is a divine truth taught in other clear Scripture passages. If we add it, we are not adding to the Word of God in its essence. If we omit it, we are not taking away from the Word of God in its essence. Only by confusing the form and essence of the Word of God will we experience difficulty here.

Finally, *where false doctrine would result from a variant reading* (and such cases are so rare as to be almost non-existent), no one need have any doubt about the reading of the autographs. Such readings are manifestly false. And we can say this on two counts. First, the manuscript evidence does not support the doctrinally false reading. Secondly, we are not wholly dependent on the manuscript evidence. The same manuscript of Matthew that says that Joseph begot Jesus also says that he knew her not until she had brought forth a son called Jesus. This second passage in the same chapter of Matthew and every other passage that testifies to the virgin birth brands that reading as incorrect. Unless the copyist was incredibly stupid, one can only conclude that he understood the word "begot" to mean that Joseph was the legal father of Jesus, not the biological father of Jesus.

Those who see the variant readings as an excuse for the denial of verbal inspiration and inerrancy are not motivated by true scholarly concern for the facts. They have a theological ax to grind. Any honest examination of the evidence will show that the facts do not support them. As we said at the beginning, true orthodox conservative Lutheranism has nothing to fear from the variant readings. The message brought to us in the Holy Scriptures is not distorted nor vitiated by any of them that could conceivably be correct.