

A Grave Matter: Verity, Sagacity and Charity in the Textual Debate

Introduction

The controversy over the textual issue underlying the KJV has adversely affected the BPCs in Singapore lately. Some of the BP churches (and even their local and foreign missions) are divided and disillusioned and it has also resulted in many unedifying exchanges and confused and disheartened brethren without the denomination.

It cannot be denied that grievous events have happened to some BP churches as a result of the introduction of the teaching of the Verbal Plenary Preservation (VPP) over the past 6 years. While it may not be the deliberate intention of the proponents (or opponents) of VPP to be divisive and in their own respective opinions, a sincere and ardent desire to “defend the Bible”, but in the process of propagating their views vehemently to gain adherents possibly, it had invariably led to devastating disunity and heated disagreements within certain churches, Christian families and kindred friends. An objective and biblical appraisal of the debate is warranted for such a time as this.

Honest Biblical Scholarship

The official stand of MBPC on the Bible is represented in the MBPC Membership Handbook of 2007 on pages 13 and 14, which highlights the Westminster Confession of Faith (1643-47) statement on the Word of God in Chap I Section VIII, which has been in our BP constitution since 4 Jun 1937 when ¹Dr. Carl McIntire founded the BP movement in St James Hotel, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (I confirmed this fact with him personally in May 2001 in New Jersey). **The WCF is a historic Reformed Creed that properly represents our stand on the Bible and the correct biblical understanding of God’s providential preservation and this is also consistent with the stand of Trinitarian Bible Society (TBS).** The VPP teaching espoused by some (though noble in its aims and aspirations) which believe in the perfection of the Textus Receptus (TR) underlying the KJV of 1611 is laudable, but is biblically and theologically not conclusively proven from scripture. There are approximately 30 revisions² of the TRs since Erasmus’ edition of 1516 and they vary from each other slightly and hence, none of them are perfect.³ EF Hills speaks of variant readings of Erasmus, Stephanus, Beza and the Elzevirs in describing the various editions of the TR.⁴ **The Greek text underlying the NT and recommended strongly by TBS today is the Scrivener text of 1894 and TBS ascribes no perfection to it though they hold it in high regard.**⁵

¹ He went home to be with the Lord in glory on 19 March 2002 and is remembered for incepting not only the Bible Presbyterian movement, but also the International Council of Christian Churches, American Council of Christian Churches, Faith Theological Seminary and the Reformation Radio Hour in the mid 20th century.

² <http://www.trinitarianbiblesociety.org/site/articles/tr-art.asp>

³ E. F. Hills, *The King James Version Defended*, 222-223.

⁴ Hills, 223.

⁵ The position of TBS regarding the Textus Receptus is as follows, “It is our aim to “produce or select versions whose textual basis is **as close as possible** to the Hebrew Masoretic and the Greek Received texts underlying both the English Authorised

The KJV translators relied extensively on the work of William Tyndale, the 4th edition of Beza Greek New Testament of 1588-59 and other English Bibles, like the Great and Bishop Bibles and the Complutensian Polygot as well.⁶ Hills said,

“Hence there are some New Testament passages in which the true reading cannot be determined with absolute certainty. There are some readings, for example, on which the manuscripts are almost equally divided, making it difficult to determine which reading belongs to the Traditional Text. **Also in some of the cases in which the Textus Receptus disagrees with the Traditional Text it is hard to decide which text to follow. Also, as we have seen, sometimes the several editions of the Textus Receptus differs from each other and from the King James Versions**”⁷

After labouring through eighteen editions of the TR, F.H.A. Scrivener produced an edition of the Greek New Testament which reflects a variety of the TR underlying the King James Version. Scrivener’s TR was published in 1894.

Scrivener was the undisputed expert in the 19th century of the existing Greek New Testament manuscripts, and on the KJV in its various editions. He did a thorough study of these ancient texts and published many of his findings. For example it was his opinion that some parts of the KJV follow only loosely the Greek text but very closely the Latin Vulgate.

“In some places the Authorised Version corresponds but loosely with any form of the Greek original, while it exactly follows the Latin Vulgate,”⁸ *(emphasis added)*

With this fact, do we then pronounce the Latin Vulgate perfect? No sound and prudent pastor or theologian will do that for it will be totally inaccurate and unjustified.

Hills, an honest and highly acclaimed scholar and noted staunch defender of the KJV was careful not to overstate his position on the text. He said,

“God’s preservation of the NT text was not miraculous but providential. The scribes and printers who produced the copies of the NT scriptures and the true believers who read and cherished them were not inspired but God guided. Hence there are some New Testament passages in which the reading cannot be determined with absolute (or 100%) certainty.”⁹ *(parenthesis added for clarity)*

With that, Hills went on to make his point clear which is this, **“but that special providence of God has kept these uncertainties down to a minimum hence if we believe in the special providential preservation of the scriptures and make this the leading principle of our**

Version and translations of comparable standing made from these texts into other European languages at the time of the Protestant Reformation". This statement continues our long-held belief in the **superiority and excellence** of the Textus Receptus.”

(<http://www.trinitarianbiblesociety.org/site/articles/tr-art.asp>)

⁶ Hills, 220-221.

⁷ Hills, 224. Hills add, “In other words, God does not reveal every truth with equal clarity.”

⁸ F. H. A. Scrivener, *The New Testament in Greek according to the Text Followed in the Authorized Version*. Cambridge: University Press, 1881;. ix. The appendix on 655-6 gives a list of the places corresponding exactly with the Latin Vulgate against the Greek.

⁹ Hills, 224.

biblical criticism, we obtain maximum certainty.”¹⁰ Hills, one of the foremost defenders of the KJV and the TR, did not use the phrase “100% certainty” though it is in his vocabulary but “maximum certainty” which is sound and theologically and biblically substantiated.

Under the heading “the Human Aspect of the Textus Receptus”, Hills admitted that “there were few typographical errors which still remain in the Textus Receptus of Revelation which do not involve important readings.”¹¹ He quoted Hoskier’s monumental commentary on Revelation (1929) to validate this fact. Just like the Westminster divines and TBS esteemed members, **Hills is honest about the text issue when defending it in the right spirit and manner and not over inflating his position beyond what the Lord will have him to.** We thank God for his honest and godly scholarship which in no means diminish our faith in our providentially preserved Bible today.

Dean Burgon, the WCF divines, TBS, EF Hills and Bible-believing churches affirm fully what the inspired apostle said in 2 Peter 1:19-21,

“We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts: Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost”

Maranatha BPC’s Position on the Text Issue

We believe in God’s sovereign, perpetual and full preservation of the body of the Byzantine or Traditional complete family of texts (as opposed to the inferior Alexandrian text type) which is kept pure through the ages by the providence of God, altogether authentic (Isaiah 40:8, Psalm 119:89), and we do not believe in a single purified perfect text only. It must be stated here that the TR underlying the KJV is a subset (not withstanding a faithful one) of the Byzantine family type text and they are NOT synonymous.

Hence, it is noteworthy that these trusted and God-fearing Bible defenders did not use the word “perfect”¹² to describe the TR **but that it is a superior, best, trustworthy, accurate, faithful, reliable, kept pure or closest to the originals as used by reputable and sound Christian bodies like the WCF, ICCC, TBS¹³ and PCC.¹⁴ These proper adjectives used**

¹⁰ Hills, 224.

¹¹ Hills, 202.

¹² Hills said, “We ought to be grateful that in the providence of God that the **best form** of the Textus Receptus is still available to believing Bible students. For the sake of **completeness**, however, it would be well to place in the margin the variant readings of Erasmus, Stephanus, Beza, and Elzevirs.” (Hills, 223)

¹³ The phrase “most reliable form of the text of the Old Testament” was used to describe the Masoretic Text and “a faithful representation of the text which the church in different parts of the world had used for centuries” was used to describe the TR and that it is superior to the texts used by the United Bible Societies. (*An Introduction to the Society’s Principles*, Trinitarian Bible Society, 1997, 3).

to describe the TR, which is the underlying text, puts it in proper perspective and does not overstate or understate the case improperly. Otherwise, it is unjustified, uncalled for and may open the Pandora box to a whole realm of unnecessary controversies which had plagued the BP churches today and some Baptist churches in the US in the past. If any choose to believe or state otherwise, it is at best a theological conjecture on their bibliology, a doctrinal speculation or conviction which should not be imposed on others as dogma. **A belligerent crusade or campaign to convert people to their convictions by some, either willfully or inadvertently, has invariably led to the confusion and disunity of the churches in the BPC movement in Singapore.**

It must be noted here that the frequent quoting of the scripture verses like Psalm 12:6,7; Matthew 5:18; 24:35; Psalm 19:7; 1 Corinthians 13:8; Isaiah 40:8 and Psalm 119:89 do not support the VPP teaching of a perfect TR of 1611 but is at best a private or specific interpretation of it by some that is not totally proven nor fully substantiated by scripture alone. **Depending on the context, these verses either teach us the fulfillment or completion or sufficiency of Holy Scripture, providential and perpetual preservation of God's words or His covenant people, or the eternity and indestructibility of God's holy and inerrant Word.** It does not validate or authenticate the perfection or imperfection of the TR underlying the KJV of 1611. Note that the WORD of God quoted in scripture is NOT necessarily synonymous to the TR underlying the KJV of 1611 (excellent as an underlying text it may be), although it may be said that there is some correlation between the two. The reason for saying this is that the **TR underlying the KJV does NOT fully represent the full body of the providentially and perpetually preserved Byzantine or Traditional¹⁵ (or sometimes called Majority) Text and is a subset of it at best (as**

¹⁴ PCC stands for Pensacola Christian College, one of the foremost defenders of the biblical doctrine of providential preservation of the Bible in the US in its proper context. Professor Dell Johnson, the former Dean of Pensacola Theological Seminary and a prudent, reputable and honest scholar, **would not use the word "perfect" to describe the TR but the words "best or superior or God's providentially preserved text".**

¹⁵ The following quote from TBS provides an understanding of what constitutes the Traditional text. "First of all it is necessary to understand what is meant by the term 'traditional text'. During the 1st century following the resurrection of Christ, God moved men to pen His Word (2 Peter 1.21). The result was a group of letters and books, written in *Koine* Greek (called the 'original autographs'). These letters and books were copied and recopied throughout the centuries and distributed throughout the world. These copies comprise the manuscripts of the New Testament. **Over 5,000 of these Greek manuscripts have survived to this day. The great number of these Greek manuscripts supports what is called the Byzantine textual tradition,** Byzantine because it came from all over the Greek-speaking world at that time. These Byzantine manuscripts make up what is called the Traditional Text of the New Testament. The best printed representation of this Byzantine text-type is the Textus Receptus (or Received Text). In addition to the manuscripts, we also have available many works in which numerous Church Fathers quoted from the manuscripts. The work of John Burgon has established that the basic text used by numerous Church Fathers is the same as the text now known as the Byzantine Text. The Textus Receptus was compiled from a number of Byzantine manuscripts by numerous editors from the early 1500s. There were editions from textual editors such as Erasmus, Stephens, Beza, the Elzevirs, Mill and Scrivener. These editions differ slightly from one another but still are regarded as the same basic text. Certain editions were popular in different countries and provided the basis for New Testament translations. The Textus Receptus (as it later became known) was the text used by

opposed to the inferior Alexandrian text type). In other words, the very words of God in scripture are preserved perpetually altogether but NOT necessarily only in the TR that undergird the KJV. It is found in all the providentially preserved Majority or Traditional or Byzantine Greek manuscripts of over 5,000 by our Sovereign God whom we trust fully and there is no necessity to go on a hunt for the perfect TR underlying the KJV of 1611 today.

The Proper Place of Other Language Bibles and Translations

The faithful and reliable translation of the KJV based largely on the pure stream of the underlying TR (for the NT) and Massoretic Text (for the OT) in English is to be used in publicly reading and preaching from our pulpits. In the true spirit of the Reformation where the Bible was given in the language of the common people, other language Bibles, e.g. in Chinese, Indonesian, Tagalog, Burmese, .Kannada, Tamil, Malayalam or Telugu or other languages or dialects can be used in the preaching and teaching of God's Word. Note that in church history, when William Tyndale, the 16th century English reformer wanted to translate the Bible into English of the common people and sought permission from the authorities, one of the chief objections of Bishop Turnstall of London at that time was that the English language was inferior. He believed (and so did the established church he represented at that time) in the absolute superiority of the Latin language which alone was worthy for the Bible to be translated (and that Jerome translated the Bible into it in the 4th century under the orders of the established church) than in any other languages. **As much as we speak the English language and the fact that it is an international language, we cherish no vain ambition that it should be the only language that should have the very words of God translated into or spoken of verbally, or that the rest of the other language translations of the Bible are inferior to the English Bible, especially the KJV which we cherish and use in our churches.**

A word of honesty and verity here – **No translation of one language to another will ever be perfect, regardless how learned the translators were or how superior the underlying texts or techniques may be, but yet by God's providential guidance, He has foreordained the very words of God to be accurately and reliably represented in another language for all practical means and purposes, for the vitality of the spiritual life of the church in different ethnic or language groups all over the world. As far as the English language is concerned, the KJV is still the best of them all, unsurpassed in all the English versions available today.** Hills added correctly, **“Admittedly this venerable version (referring to the KJV) is not absolutely perfect, but it is trustworthy.”**¹⁶ *(parenthesis added)*

In other words, it must be said in the same breath, while we acknowledge that there are deficient English translations based on inferior underlying texts and defective techniques, we **should NOT discriminate, disparage or undermine any other language Bibles as long as they are faithfully and accurately translated** by godly and trained men with sound biblical

Tyndale and in turn by the translators of the English Authorised (King James) Version of 1611 and other Reformation era translations.”

(<http://www.trinitarianbiblesociety.org/site/articles/grktxt.asp>)

¹⁶ Hills, 230.

theology and approved and God sanctioned translational techniques based on reliable and faithful underlying texts.

Dean Burgon's Statement

It is instructive to note Dean Burgon's, one of the foremost defender of the historic faith and the Bible on the text issues, unequivocal statements given in his famed and standard work, *The Revision Revised*, a historic and definitive contribution for the proper and biblical defence (not an extreme or hyper fundamentalistic form as one finds in ¹⁷Peter Ruckman, Raplinger, David Cloud and others) of the Bible on his stand on the TR. Burgon wrote,

"Once for all, we request it may be clearly understood that **we do not, by any means, claim perfection for the Received Text. We entertain no extravagant notions on this subject.** Again and again we shall have occasion to point out (e.g. at page 107) that the Textus Receptus needs correction."¹⁸ (*emphasis added*)

"That by a perpetual miracle, sacred manuscripts would be protected all down the ages against depraving influences of whatever sort, was not to have been expected; certainly, was never promised. But the church in her collective capacity and hath nevertheless as a matter of fact been perpetually purging herself of those shamefully depraved copies which once everywhere abounded within her pale, retaining only such an amount of discrepancy in her Text as might serve to remind her children that they carry their 'treasure in earthen vessels' - as to stimulate them to perpetual watchfulness and solicitude for the purity and integrity of the Deposit."¹⁹ (*emphasis added*)

NPP in the BP Synod of the US

Our BP Synod in the US were recently plagued with the new fangled view called the NPP which stands for the ²⁰**New Perspective of Paul taught by US seminary professor, Dr**

¹⁷ Peter Ruckman of the Pensacola Bible Institute believes in the "inspired and perfect KJV theory" and Raplinger is notorious for her erroneous and unsubstantiated quotations in her stand for a perfect Bible and David Cloud is infamous for his extreme, unbiblical and unjustified criticisms of the Westminster Confession of Faith and the five points of Calvinism and **no God honouring reformed pastor, church or institution should promote their books or articles.**

¹⁸ Dean Burgon, *The Revision Revised*, 21.

¹⁹ Burgon, 335.

²⁰ **Dr Shepherd has a strange interpretation of Chapter 11 on Justification in the Westminster Confession.** The first paragraph is about how a sinner is justified. He taught that to become a justified person one must have the kind of faith that is accompanied by all other saving graces. At this point he picks up the confessional truth that the saving graces in should include the obedience mentioned in Chapter 14 of the Confession. But by saying that this is what justifying faith is, he forces into justifying faith the character of a transformed Christian life. In other words he takes the virtue of a person already justified and vitally united to Christ, and he then makes that a condition up front for a justification that is supposed to be by faith alone according to the catechisms. It is a massive confusion that

Norman Shepherd (and others) questioned the phrase, “justified by faith alone” which essentially redefines the biblical doctrine of justification by faith, a biblical and reformation tenet of the historic Christian faith. Thankfully, this was purged by the Lord in the nick of time to maintain the purity of our BP churches in the US and Canada. Satan will spare no effort to deceive, disrupt and confuse, if not corrupt or pervert, the churches of Christ with strange and outlandish doctrines and divide them if possible (including new age concepts, growing occultism and prevalent cultism of our times) in the last perilous days. The church is often assailed not only from without but also subtly from within (Acts 20:28-32). A case in point was the incident of a young person of a certain local BPC some years ago who was seduced with the errors of Greek Orthodoxy by a priest over the internet and he tried to introduce these unsound teachings and the practice of worshipping icons in the Youth Fellowship but was later exposed and had to leave the church quietly. End times believers and churches need to be vigilant and watchful against the seductive and deceptive wiles of the evil one which can happen to any church or institution.

The Human Quest for Perfection

The quest for perfection is a natural human instinct even among regenerate men. **Charles Finney, a notorious 19th century preacher taught that Christian may attain unto sinless perfection in this life and propagated it aggressively in his writings and teachings.**

²¹Charles Wesley, a great Arminian revivalist of the mid-18th century who was used of God in the Great Awakening of England believed in perfect sanctification of believers on earth and vehemently chided ²²George Whitefield, his contemporary who was a reformed and theologically sound itinerant preacher and revivalist for “his lack of faith in God” for this new conviction or theory. Whitefield was also assailed for his biblical belief in Calvinism (especially the biblical doctrine of predestination and the perseverance of the saints, see Ephesians 1:4 and Jude 24,25) and other reformed teachings but he was very gracious in his replies and not unduly harsh or arrogant toward his accusers. Today, on the other side of eternity, both of them are now in glory in heaven and I believe the Lord had reconciled them in both truth and love in the fear of God. **However, after more than two centuries today, the church of the Nazarenes and some charismatic churches still believe in sinless**

destroys justification by taking the faith of a poor sinner with no righteousness and demands that he come with obedience. Shepherd might as well say that to become a Christian you have to be one first. Shepherd has great reservation about calling a Christian a “sinner”. All who do not understand justification share this reluctance. They cannot see how one can be a sinner defiled and stained in every part can also be accepted by God in Christ and declared perfectly righteous. If we do not hold fast to justification entirely in the merits of Christ, such disorientation is inevitable. If we do not see justification in Christ’s righteousness we cannot help but bring our obedience and fruits of repentance into play.

http://www.grebewebcom/linden/shepherd_review.htm

²¹ Charles and John Wesley are generally credited for their initial leadership in the Methodist movement and while we may not agree with them on their theory of perfect sanctification, we admire their zest for souls and their contribution to sound hymnody especially the former.

²² George Whitefield is arguably one of the most celebrated revivalists of all times and is noted for starting poignant open air field preaching in the UK in the 1740s and for crossing the Atlantic 7 times for the cause of the gospel in the US to the saving of souls by the grace of God.

perfection or ²³perfect sanctification and this defective doctrine and its concomitant forms continue to haunt some of the churches today.

The authoritative, inspired, sufficient, perspicuous and providentially preserved Word of God is the very bedrock of our faith and the proper and sound defence of it is both important and absolutely necessary but it must be done honestly and correctly in verity, sagacity and charity i.e. we must speak the truth in love wisely. To overstate or understate our case on the text issue without scriptural warrant is a great disservice to the cause of Christ unnecessarily and will undermine our credibility. Harsh rhetoric, unedifying and personal, emotional polemical writings to undermine another unjustly with a political intent and sympathy notes to gain adherents will not change the truth “for we cannot do anything against the truth but for the truth.” (2 Corinthians 13:8). Temperance, a facet of the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:23), mutual respect and grace are much needed even among redeemed men and leaders when they are emotionally engaged in a theological controversy which often generated more heat than light.

We are soberly reminded by king Solomon who says in Ecclesiastes 9:11, “I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.”

Conclusion

We cannot deny that there are some who may be sincere and may be overly zealous for the defence of the Bible but may be genuinely misinformed or ignorant of all the biblical truths concerning this vital text issue. They are not our enemies (but that the evil one is undermining the unity and effectiveness of God’s people in their ministries) and we need to earnestly pray for discernment for all. **Sincerity and strong ardour must be accompanied by God-honouring verity and humility. The differences between the 2 sides of the controversy who are regenerate men and who love the Lord and His Word albeit with different emphases, are not irreconcilable. Admittedly, the human element have inevitably entered into the debate and have clouded the issue and render it more complex and intractable than it ought to be. Let us all pray to the Lord for wisdom in the fear of God (Proverbs 9:10) in these discussions and for all to be charitable and willing to give assent to the Truth for the Truth will set us free (John 8:32) from the entanglement of unintended harshness, intransigence or inadvertent inaccuracies and an even greater divided denomination.** Can each concentrate on their respective emphases on the Word and ministry and deny the Fiend, the pleasure of turning friends into foes, advocates into adversaries and comrades into combatans against one another? May the sovereign Almighty Jehovah have mercy upon all of us and guide, lead, enlighten and protect His covenant people from the spiritual confusion and declension of our times and grant to us honesty, humility, discernment, spiritual diligence, vigilance, the meekness of Christ and the

²³ The proper biblical understanding of this doctrine is progressive sanctification as a redeemed soul grows in holiness and the fear of God in conformity to Christ in this life after his regeneration and justification. We will not reach sinless perfection on this side of eternity as much as some would desire to but at the coming of the Lord in glorification with Him. This does not undermine the quest for practical growth in godliness and the fear and knowledge of God which is requisite in a truly regenerate life. **We may not be sinless in this life but we should strive to sin less.**

fear of God in the spirit of truth and Christian charity and unity. We will be all at the reunion of the Marriage Supper of the Lamb one day and the heavenly focus will be the reverential worship, exaltation and the glory of the most High God, even Christ with the saints triumphant.

Let us not be excessively emotive in our verbal or written exchanges and in the process, unwittingly hurt one another and be estranged from God's covenant people and distracted from our God-sanctioned vision but rather focus on Christ in the declaration of the pure and unadulterated life giving Gospel of Christ to the saving of souls and churches established to the edifying of God's people in the most holy faith once delivered to the saints in God-honouring and Bible believing gospel outreaches and missions worldwide.

In conclusion, we praise and thank God for His inspired and true Words that will last forever as 1 Peter 1:24, 25 says,

For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: **But the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you.**

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