



Concerning Textual Variants

As you know, if you've read much of what I've written over the last couple of years, I claim that I am a Christian. Not just *any kind* of Christian either. I believe that a man or woman is saved from sin and eternal damnation by the grace of God alone, through faith in Christ Jesus alone, according to the word of God alone, and for his glory alone.

Foundational to that belief is that the Holy Bible is the word of God, that it is complete, that it is sufficient, and that it is accurate. The church that I attend has this to say about it.

***Bible:** We believe the Holy Bible, both Old and New Testaments, to be the inspired and infallible Word of God, the complete revelation of His will for the salvation of mankind, and the divine and final authority for all Christian faith and life.*

— [Our Beliefs | Good Shepherd Fellowship](#)

My church, *Good Shepherd Fellowship*, is associated with the Southern Baptist Convention. The *2000 Baptist Faith and Message* opens with this statement about the Holy Bible.

I. The Scriptures

The Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is God's revelation of Himself to man. It is a perfect treasure of divine instruction. It has God for its author, salvation for

its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter. Therefore, all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy. It reveals the principles by which God judges us, and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried. All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation.

— [Baptist Faith and Message](#)

Here's what Paul had to say about Holy Scripture.

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

— 2 Timothy 3:16-17

If we believe what scripture says, and indeed how can we say that we believe in Christ if we don't believe his word, then we must believe what scripture says about itself. That is, that it is breathed out or inspired by God. That it is profitable for teaching. That it is profitable for reproof and correction. That it is profitable for training in righteousness. That God breathed it out so that the man of God might be complete and equipped for every good work, that is that it is *sufficient*.

Why then are there so many translations of the bible? Why, even in the original languages, are there so many textual variants for the same passages?

First of all, as to why there are so many different translations, the fact is that they are just that - *translations*. The original texts of the bible were written in ancient Hebrew and in Greek, not in English. Not even the English of King James, or, looking even further back, of John Wycliffe. And it certainly wasn't originally written in Latin.

In any case, very few of us today would be able to understand the original texts, even if they still existed. For example, the ancient Greek of the bible is not quite the same as the Greek language spoken today. [Nor is the original Hebrew of the bible the same as the Hebrew language spoken today](#). It's also pretty clear that the English of John Wycliffe's day would sound very foreign indeed to a modern-day English speaker. Words, pronunciation, spelling, even the shape of the letters we use have changed a great deal in the nearly 650 years that have passed since [John Wycliffe first translated and transcribed the bible into English by hand in the 1380s](#).

So *one* of the reasons we have so many translations of the bible is that the language we speak has changed over time. Another reason is that those translations use differing translation philosophies. Some will try to translate as closely as possible in a word-for-word

translation philosophy. Others try to translate as closely as possible in a thought-for-thought translation philosophy. If you open a New International Version, or an English Standard Version or a New American Standard Version or even a King James Version of the bible you will find a short explanation of how the translation was produced.

I'm not going to argue (in this post at least) which translation philosophy is best, although if you want my opinion, I think that the word-for-word approach is probably the least prone to tampering by the translators. My point is that, in any case, the translations of the bible aren't inspired by God. They are the works of men.

I don't speak or even read ancient Hebrew or ancient Greek. I'm lucky I even speak English well, and it's my native tongue. Still, if I want the infallible inerrant word of God I've got to go back to the original languages to get it. Because I don't have the time, nor the intellectual capacity to do that without sacrificing a lot of the other things I need to do in my life, I have to trust myself to the translations that are available to me in English.

I have a preferred translation, the English Standard Version, but I don't rely solely upon it. I also read other translations from time to time and compare them to one another. By doing this, with multiple translations, as well as with other tools, I am reasonably certain that I am reading the words that God gave for me to understand his will, and to understand him.

But what of the fact that we no longer have the original manuscripts? Moses wrote Genesis through Deuteronomy somewhere around 3,500 years ago, and there aren't any copies of them that are that old. The last new testament book was written close to 1,900 years ago, and we don't have any copies of it that are that old either. So how can we know that the bible we have today carries God's word as he intended it?

Well, how about the sheer number of existing manuscripts? [For the new testament, there are over 20,000 ancient manuscripts in existence](#). That's more, by several orders of magnitude, than exist for several ancient Greek works that we accept as being reliable today. Not only that, but the earliest new testament manuscripts we have were transcribed much closer to the time when the original manuscripts were penned than any of the other ancient works, by an order of magnitude in time as well. For the old testament we have still more ancient writings that confirm the text, many of them pre-dating the writing of the new testament. [The bible has been more reliably preserved for us today than the works of any other ancient writings](#).

But, what about all of the *textual variants* that exist? There are thousands of them too, but an analysis of textual variants show that the new testament we have today is [99.5% textually pure](#). Fortunately, nearly all of the variants that do exist are minor. A misspelled word here, a dropped word there or an added one or a few words juxtaposed. Recall that until Gutenberg *every copy* of ancient scripture was made by hand.

If textual variants are an excuse that you feel inclined to use to not trust the bible, I'd like to

offer up a challenge for you. In Deuteronomy chapter 17, the Lord commanded Israel regarding the time when they would want a king.

“And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, approved by the Levitical priests. And it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them, that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers, and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, either to the right hand or to the left, so that he may continue long in his kingdom, he and his children, in Israel.

— Deuteronomy 17:18-20

That’s right, the Lord required the new king to write for himself in a book a copy of the law, that is Genesis through Deuteronomy. He was to write it in his own hand.

My challenge for you is this: Pick a book, any book. You’ll probably want to choose a short one. Get yourself a blank book or journal and copy that original book word-for-word in your own hand. Take special care to write exactly the same words that you read. Be sure to capitalize words the same way they are in your source book. Be sure to spell everything the same way it is in your source book. Be VERY careful while you do this. Then hand over your copy and the original to someone else and have them compare it carefully. You’re likely not the king of Israel, but that’s the way *he* had to do it.

How many textual variants do you think you’ll produce doing this? And how many of them do you think will corrupt the meaning of the text you chose? Some of us are more meticulous than others, and many probably more so than I, but even trying my best with the book of John I had literally dozens of variants within the first few chapters alone. Nothing changed the meaning of the text, but it was an eye-opener for me.

I think the word of God is remarkably preserved for us today. And I think there’s no excuse for not accepting it for what it is, the word of the living God, which when we hear it has the power to lead us to the Lord who can save our souls. (2 Timothy 3:15)