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A table of contents for *Theological Students Fellowship* (TSF) *Bulletin* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_tsfbulletin_01.php

'As Originally Given'

F.F. Bruce

[p.2]

These three words, on which I have been asked to write something, appear in the I.V.F. doctrinal basis, which lists among 'the truths of Christianity' which the I.V.F. exists to uphold: 'The divine inspiration and infallibility; of Holy Scripture, as originally given, and its supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct.'

What is the point of this saving phrase, 'as originally given'? Is it to provide a means of escape for the apologist who, challenged to account for the presence of a factual discrepancy in the biblical record, may find it convenient to answer: 'Yes, I admit that the discrepancy is present in the Bible as we have it now; but if only we had access to the passages in, question

[p.3]

"as originally given", we should certainly find that there was no discrepancy'? Sometimes critics of the position taken up by the I.V.F. and like-minded have suggested that this is the point of such a phrase. The late B.W. Bacon, for example, poked fun at the old Princeton school by speaking of their 'lost inerrant Bible'. As thus caricatured, the old Princetonians held that the Bible was inerrant indeed, but that unfortunately its inerrant form disappeared with the autographs. One has only to look at the little handbook on *Textual Criticism of the New Testament* by one of these old Princetonians, B.B. Warfield, to realize that this representation of their viewpoint was indeed a caricature.

More seriously, some writers have taken the view that since in a few places the original wording has probably been lost beyond recovery (barring the appearance of some wholly unexpected evidence), a phrase such as that under discussion is rather pointless. Thus Professor Rendle Short wrote: 'In a few passages in the Old Testament the true reading seems to be hopelessly lost, For this reason it is rather theoretical to discuss whether the Bible as originally written was verbally inspired, word for word, as well as thought for thought. We are concerned, not with the original, but with the Book in our hands, God-breathed and God-preserved.'

But the men who drafted the I.V.F. doctrinal basis were certainly not concerned with theoretical issues when they added the words 'as originally given'. Their concern was much more practical. They wished it to be clearly understood that the two processes of transmission and translation, thanks to which we have received the Bible in our own language today, are not exempt from human frailty: No translation (not even the Authorized Version) is so good that it cannot be improved upon; no edition of the original (not even the Massoretic Text of the Old Testament or the Received Text of the New) is a perfect reproduction of the autographs. We may press our inquiry still farther back. Paul the apostle dictated his Epistle to the Romans to Tertius. The words which Paul spoke were vested with the authority of an apostle of Christ; did Tertius hear every word aright and put everything down on his writing-tablet without one slip? For example, we know about the two variant readings in Rom. v. 1. Did Paul use the indicative *echomen* ('we have') or the subjunctive *echömen* ('let us have')? By the first century A.D. there was probably no more difference in pronunciation between the two forms than there is in Modern Greek. Is it possible, then, that Paul meant the indicative

while Tertius understood the subjunctive? I suppose the words 'as originally given' would, in such a hypothetical situation, apply to what Paul said (and meant) and not to what Tertius understood (and wrote).

What the phrase means, in fact, is that, just because of the supreme value attached to the biblical record as 'God's Word written', we must continually do our best to determine as closely as possible what the original text was, and then to secure the most accurate versions of that text. Every fresh discovery which throws light on the meaning of the biblical vocabulary, all new evidence bearing on the transmission of the biblical text, must be welcomed and made to yield up its last ounce of information. The textual, linguistic and historical approaches to Bible study must be thoroughly explored, not indeed as ends in themselves, but for the better understanding of the sacred writings in which, by the illuminating aid of the Spirit, we hear God speak and see the face of Christ.

But by stressing the words 'as originally given' the I.V.F. does not mean to suggest that there is a great gulf between the autographic text which we try to reconstruct as accurately as possible and the text exhibited by the most familiar editions of the Bible today. By the 'singular care and providence' of God the Bible text has come down to us in such substantial purity that even the most uncritical edition of the Hebrew and Greek, or the most incompetent or even the most tendentious translation of such an edition, cannot effectively obscure the real message of the Bible, or neutralize its saving power. But we are so eager to let that message make its full saving impact that we strive to eliminate from its path every obstacle of scribal inaccuracy and translational defect and the like in order that Bible readers may hold in their hands and receive in their hearts copies of Holy Writ which represent as closely as possible the Word of God 'as originally given' through prophet and apostle, and supremely in Jesus Christ His Son.

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