Ad Fontes, Week Fourteen: The Majority Text, Fairly Presented

Chapter 13: The Majority Text Position, Fairly Presented

Adult Sunday School · **Grace Free Lutheran Church** · Valley City, North Dakota

Taught by **Larry Herzog Jr.** · Fall 2026

Week Fourteen

This week we give a full and fair hearing to a view this class does not hold: that the Greek text found in the great majority of manuscripts should be our starting point. Serious, believing scholars hold it, and they have produced Greek New Testaments you can hold in your hand. Our job is to understand their best arguments, say plainly where we differ, and remember that these are brothers in Christ. Nothing we confess depends on who wins this argument.

How we will spend the next hour

Minutes	What we are doing
0 to 5	Opening and prayer
5 to 12	Report back: your best argument for the majority
12 to 22	Three positions, not one
22 to 28	The Textus Receptus and the Majority Text are not the same
28 to 42	The strongest case for the Majority Text
42 to 54	Where the case does not carry
54 to 62	Pairs exercise: argue it fairly
62 to 67	Brothers who disagree
67 to 70	Assignment and closing

1. Report back: your best argument for the majority

Last week you wrote one sentence making the strongest case you could for trusting the reading found in the most manuscripts. Read them aloud. We will keep them on the board and see how they compare with what the scholars actually argue.

2. Three positions, not one

People lump these together. They should not.

Position	Claims	Who holds it	Scholarly standing
King James Only	The 1611 King James (often its 1769 edition) is the one preserved English Bible; other versions are corrupt	Popular writers such as Peter Ruckman, Sam Gipp, David Cloud, and Gail Riplinger	No serious scholarly defenders. Not our subject today
Textus Receptus priority	The printed Greek text behind the King James is the providentially preserved Greek New Testament	Edward F. Hills (*The King James Version Defended*), Theodore Letis, Jeffrey Khoo, the Trinitarian Bible Society	A small but serious, theologically driven circle
Majority Text (Byzantine priority)	The text found in the majority of Greek manuscripts is the best guide to what the apostles wrote	Maurice Robinson and William Pierpont (*Byzantine Textform*, 2005; now a 2018 edition); Zane Hodges and Arthur Farstad (*The Greek New Testament according to the Majority Text*, 1982)	Real scholars with published Greek editions

Today's main conversation partner is the third position, with Hills as the bridge to the second. One more voice deserves a mention: James Snapp's "equitable eclecticism," which weighs readings one at a time like the critical text does, but gives the Byzantine manuscripts a fuller hearing than the Nestle-Aland editors have.

3. The Textus Receptus and the Majority Text are not the same

The Textus Receptus is a printed text from the 1500s, built from a few late manuscripts plus some readings from the Latin. The Majority Text is what most Greek manuscripts actually say. They agree most of the time, but they differ at roughly 1,800 places, about 1,000 of them visible in translation, and several places we have studied show the difference.

Passage	Textus Receptus (King James)	Majority Text
1 John 5:7 to 8 (Week Eight)	Has the Comma	Omits it
Acts 8:37 (Week Eleven)	Has the eunuch's confession	Omits it (Robinson and Pierpont keep only the verse number)
Luke 17:36 (Week Eleven)	Has "two men in the field"	Omits it

Passage	Textus Receptus (King James)	Majority Text
Acts 9:5 to 6	“it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks”	Omits it here (it stands at Acts 26:14)
Acts 20:28 (Week Nine)	“church of God”	“church of the Lord and God”
Revelation 22:19 (Week Two)	“book of life”	“tree of life”

Several of the Textus Receptus’s odd readings came from the Latin, by way of Erasmus. So “the text of the King James” and “the text of most manuscripts” are two different things. If you own a New King James, its footnotes marked “M-Text” show you where they part ways. (The NKJV itself is translated from the Textus Receptus; Hodges and Farstad’s edition supplies those footnotes.)

4. The strongest case for the Majority Text

Here is the position at its best, in the words of its own ablest defenders. Try to feel the weight of each point before we answer it.

Maurice Robinson: four arguments

Robinson, professor emeritus at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, has spent more than fifty years in the manuscripts and writes for scholars, not for pamphlets. He insists his case is historical and transmissional, not a theological deduction.

1. **Normal copying keeps the original in the majority.** Across the Greek-speaking world, for centuries, scribes copied what was in front of them, in many places at once, with no central authority imposing one form of the text. An error starts in one copy or one region; it does not spread everywhere at once. So the reading found in the bulk of manuscripts from across the Greek world is what normal copying would produce.
2. **There was no revision, and the readings are old.** Westcott and Hort explained the Byzantine text as a deliberate fourth-century revision. There is no historical record of one. And Byzantine readings show up early: Harry Sturz gathered distinctive Byzantine readings from the papyri P45, P46, P66, and P75, and many appear in the Old Latin, the Old Syriac, and fathers like Cyprian and Tertullian.
3. **The accidents of survival.** Early Byzantine Greek manuscripts are scarce because papyrus survived in Egypt’s dry sand, not in the damp Greek East, and the persecutions under Decius and Diocletian destroyed early copies elsewhere. Thin evidence is a fact about survival, not about the age of the text.
4. **A text somebody actually read.** Our modern critical text is assembled reading by reading. As James Snapp reports, Robinson found 105 verses in NA27 whose printed text no manuscript contains. The Byzantine text is a text Christians really held and preached from.

Zane Hodges and Arthur Farstad: the head-start argument

Their 1982 edition, with a statistical model from Hodges's brother David, a statistician, argued like this: if the original reads A and an early copy introduces B, then A starts with a head start. Copy after copy, A will tend to outnumber B unless some editor deliberately reshapes the text. So, all else equal, the majority reading should be the original.

Edward Hills: the argument from providence

Hills earned a doctorate at Harvard with a dissertation on the Caesarean text, then came to a theological conviction: if God preserves his Word, he must preserve it in a form the church can actually identify and use. For Hills that form was the Textus Receptus, the Greek text the Reformation received and the Protestant world preached from for four centuries. Hills, and Theodore Letis after him under the name "the ecclesiastical text," added two strands:

- **A thousand years of worship.** The Byzantine text is the text the Greek-speaking church read aloud in its liturgy for a millennium. A text does not become the church's reading text by accident.
- **Preservation you can count.** If God preserved his Word in the church, we should expect to see it in the copies the church actually made and used. Those are overwhelmingly Byzantine: some five thousand, against a few hundred leaning Alexandrian.

Be honest: none of these is a foolish argument. Robinson's early readings and his point about a text no manuscript contains, especially, have real force.

5. Where the case does not carry

Their argument	Our answer
Most manuscripts	Weighed, not counted (Week Five). If the Byzantine text became standard in the 300s or 400s and was then copied for a thousand years in the Greek-speaking empire, it would be the majority whether or not it stands closest to the apostles. Numbers tell us where copying happened, not how close a copy is to the original. Even Snapp agrees a reading should not win because it was popular in Byzantine scriptoriums. And the head-start argument assumes no editor ever reshaped the text, which is exactly what is in question
A thousand years of worship (Hills, Letis)	True, and worthy of respect. But the Latin Vulgate also had a thousand years of worship in the West, and no one, Robinson included, argues from that that the Vulgate outranks the Greek. Our Reformers went behind it, to the sources. Long use shows what a church received, not by itself how close that text stands to what the apostles wrote

Their argument	Our answer
Its readings are old, too	Often true, and a fair correction to anyone who calls the Byzantine text “late.” The papyri prove some Byzantine readings are early, and the Münster editors now grant that Byzantine witnesses sometimes keep the earliest reading (as at 1 Peter 4:16). But most of those early readings are small matters of word order, and at the larger distinctive Byzantine readings the older witnesses still tend to stand against them. At John 1:18 (Week Nine), “only God” stands in P66, P75, Sinaiticus, and Vaticanus, while “only Son” first appears in Greek in the 400s
Preservation must mean one identifiable text	Our Lutheran fathers taught preservation in the whole stream of copies, not in one line or one printed edition (Week Two). Preservation promises that God’s Word will not pass away (Matthew 24:35). It does not tell us which reading is original at a given verse. That is left to careful, ordinary work

Give them credit

These editors do real work. Both Majority Text editions leave out the Comma, Acts 8:37, and Luke 17:36, because most manuscripts lack them, even though the King James has them. They follow their evidence even when it costs them a familiar verse, and they mark on the page where the Byzantine manuscripts themselves divide. That is scholarship, not sectarianism.

6. Pairs exercise: argue it fairly

Pair up. One partner takes the Majority Text side, the other our side. You have six minutes.

1. The Majority Text partner makes the single strongest case, in his or her own words, drawn from section 4.
2. The other partner restates that case so well that the first partner says, “Yes, that’s it.”
3. Only then does the second partner answer, using section 5.
4. Switch sides and repeat with a different argument.

The point is not to win. It is to learn to disagree with a fellow Christian the way we would want to be disagreed with.

7. Brothers who disagree

Robinson, Hodges, Farstad, and Hills are not enemies of the Bible. They are Christians who love it, have given their lives to its manuscripts, and reached a different judgment about method.

The disagreement is about method, not doctrine. The deity of Christ, the Trinity, the resurrection, justification by faith, and the means of grace stand on the whole witness of Scripture whichever Greek text an editor prefers. At the Christological readings of Week Nine, the streams differ in wording but not in the deity of Christ: the older text is bolder at John 1:18, the Byzantine is more explicit at 1 Timothy 3:16, and both confess the same Christ. Both Majority Text editions omit the Comma, and still confess the Trinity.

Their deepest worry is one we share: that ordinary Christians not lose confidence in the Bible the church has received. Where we differ is on how wide that inheritance is. We hold that God has kept his Word in the whole stream of witnesses, Alexandrian, Western, and Byzantine, with the early translations and the fathers alongside, and that careful, honest work within that stream brings us to what the apostles wrote. We can say so plainly, and still sing the same hymns with them on the Lord's Day.

For discussion

1. Which Majority Text argument did you find strongest? Did you change your mind about anything?
2. Why does it matter to keep "King James Only," "Textus Receptus," and "Majority Text" distinct?
3. How is the doctrine of preservation different from a claim that one particular text is the preserved one?
4. How did it feel to argue a view you do not hold? What did you learn?

Working vocabulary, new this week

Add these to your vocabulary page.

King James Only. The popular view that the King James is the one preserved English Bible.

Textus Receptus priority. The view that the printed Greek text of the Reformation era is the preserved Greek New Testament.

Majority Text (Byzantine priority). The view that the reading of most Greek manuscripts is the best guide to the original.

Eclectic text. A text built reading by reading from the best evidence, like the Nestle-Aland text behind our Bibles.

M-Text. The label in New King James footnotes for the Majority Text.

Steel-man. To state an opposing view in its strongest form before answering it; the opposite of a "straw man."

Before next Sunday

Read. Chapter 14, “How the Discipline Works Now: Reasoned Eclecticism, Thoroughgoing Eclecticism, and the CBGM.”

Do this one thing. Reread the footnotes in your Bible (BSB, ESV, NASB, whatever you have) at the passages we have studied: Mark 16, John 8, 1 John 5, John 1:18, Acts 8:37. Next to each, jot the one-sentence reason you now think the modern text reads as it does.

Bring. Your Bible, your notes, and your vocabulary pages.

Think about. Who in your life sees Scripture differently than you do? How could you listen to them this week the way we practiced today?

A closing word

Thanks be to God for brothers and sisters whose love for the apostolic Word has led them to conclusions we do not share: for Maurice Robinson’s patient labor, for Zane Hodges and Arthur Farstad, and for Edward Hills. Thanks be to God that our disagreement about method does not divide us on Christ. And thanks be to God for a Word kept in its whole breadth, in which the church confesses the same Lord across every difference of judgment.

“Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will never pass away.” Matthew 24:35 (BSB)

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Scripture quotations are from the Berean Standard Bible (BSB), with the KJV and other translations quoted where the lesson compares them. Confessional citations follow the Kolb-Wengert edition of the Book of Concord.