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One

INTELLECTUAL SKEPTICISM

Mid-September

“HOW MANY of you all—or should I say *y’all*—grew up in Texas?”

About half of the hands in the classroom went up.

“Good, glad to see it. My wife and I have enjoyed living here for almost twelve years now. We’ve learned a few things too. For example, here in the South, especially right here in Dallas, the *buckle* of the Bible Belt, we dare not question the historical authority of the books of the Bible, or we’re damned to hell!”

A few chuckles echoed across the small auditorium. Dr. William Peterson,



Distinguished Professor of Religious Studies and a renowned expert on ancient textual criticism, was well known for his views. Smiling wryly, he continued, “Honestly, I appreciate the concern these fundamentalists, Catholics, and evangelicals have for our souls, and I believe they are genuinely sincere—just sincerely misled.”

Nick, a freshman at Opal University, listened intently as Dr. Peterson went on. “Conservative Christians are quick to judge those of us in academia for our views, but my question for them would be, ‘What is the historical basis for believing the Bible really is the inerrant Word of God?’ I want to know what persuades them to actually believe that the copies of the Bible translated today are even close to what was originally written down? It *sounds* good and faithful, but what are the facts? That’s what we’re here to explore. Are you ready for the facts?”

The room fell silent as the professor paused for effect. “Here are the facts that leading scholars all across the country agree upon. *We don’t even have the words that these fundamentalist Christians tell us God inerrantly inspired.* That’s right. All we have are words copied by scribes—sometimes correctly but certainly not always. We have error-ridden copies that are centuries removed from the originals and different from them in thousands of ways.”¹

Nick’s heart raced as he listened to the professor contradict what his pastor back home at Park Springs Com-

munity Church had taught the congregation. He sensed in his spirit this was his time to be bold for Christ and take a stand for the Lord. “That’s not true!” he declared. “How dare you question God’s Word.”

The professor, somewhat taken aback by the student’s interruption, responded kindly. “Very well, why don’t you tell us what *is* true. What’s not accurate about what I just said?”

Nick, now feeling a tad embarrassed and put on the spot, raised his voice. “Well, I’m a Christian and I believe the Bible is the inspired Word of God. I accept it as the Word of God by *faith*! Hebrews says, ‘Without faith it is impossible to please God,’ and since God is sovereign and we are just human beings, who are we to question His sovereignty? Also, the Bible says, ‘All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness so that everyone will always be prepared to give an answer.’”

Dr. Peterson smiled and nodded. “I admire your personal faith and concern to quote portions of Hebrews 11 and 2 Timothy 3. Would you remind me of your name?”

“I’m Nick.”

“I’m glad you’re in this class, Nick. I remember memorizing those same verses myself. Looking back, I think it was when I attended Calvin Christian Academy during my early teens.” Noting Nick’s look of surprise, he continued,

“By the way, Nick, I think 2 Timothy 3 ends by saying, ‘so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.’ Perhaps, you were conflating it with 1 Peter 3:15, which mentions giving an answer or defense. That’s okay, and really beside the point. What I was saying earlier, Nick, is that we really can’t be sure the original book of Hebrews and the letter of 2 Timothy actually *said* the words you just quoted and that we both memorized. We don’t have the ‘original’ of the Bible. The Bibles that you and I own have been radically changed over the past two thousand years.”

“I don’t believe that!” Nick blurted out.

“Oh? Would you care to educate us then?” asked the distinguished professor. The rest of the class murmured their annoyance at this rude, outspoken Christian.

“Well . . . um,” Nick stumbled. “You can’t, uh, I mean it’s not only about the words, Professor. God continues to change lives. I experience the presence of Jesus in my life every day. And . . . um . . . oh yeah, I remember—when I went to youth camp in Tyler we had this former atheist speak to us and he told us his testimony and shared that we have archeological evidence and old historical manuscripts, or copies of the Bible, that verify God’s Word. Professor, this former atheist is now a Christian!” Nick asserted this last part with confidence, believing the Holy Spirit had helped him finish stronger than he started.

“Nick, it certainly is true that we have manuscripts or copies of the early letters and gospels written, but what *type* of manuscripts is the question! I’ve looked at some of these manuscripts myself, Nick, and the number of variants, or differences, between various handwritten copies is in the hundreds of thousands!”² The majority of scholars in the country have come to recognize these facts. For example, a man I respect, Bart Ehrman, the head of the religion department at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, has published some excellent academic works on textual criticism.”

Dr. Peterson took a few steps closer to his students and sat on his stool near the front row where Nick was sitting. “Nick, I admire your sincere faith and I respect your religion, but the purpose of this class is to study religion *historically*. Class, let me ask you a question. Where is the *original* Bible that God inspired? Is it located in some museum? Does anyone know? Nick? Anybody?”

The class was silent, and by this time Nick was speechless as well.

“Come on, class, join the conversation. Anyone can speak up and help Nick out!” After a few awkward moments, the professor continued, “It’s okay, Nick. Nobody knows. Listen to me, class. *We don’t have the original*. There is no evidence that a ‘God’ inspired these letters. If this God of the Bible existed and was all-powerful, don’t you think He

would have cleared up the confusion for us all? For example, if you grew up going to church like I did, or like our friend Nick, your Bible probably has four gospels in the New Testament. But did you know there were many other gospels that were *not* included? What about the *Gospel of Thomas*, or the gospels of Philip or Mary Magdalene?³

“Students, I care about your personal beliefs. But I also care about your intellectual honesty in all areas—including the history of religion. I wish I had time to explain all of this to you today, but we’ll get to it as the semester progresses. The message of Christianity is nothing new or unique. When I began studying biblical literature in graduate school, I discovered that stories of dying and rising gods, virgin births, and miracle workers were already widespread throughout the known world when the gospels were written.⁴ We’ll look into these things in more depth the next time we’re together. Class dismissed.”