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## Question 22 - What are variants in regard to the Scriptures?

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## 101 MOST ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE BIBLE

### 22. What are variants in regard to the Scriptures?

It is a known fact that scholars possess 5366 New Testament manuscripts. Norm Geisler and Ronald Brooks observe:

“With all those manuscripts, there are a lot of little differences. It is easy for someone to leave the wrong impression by saying that there are 200,000 ‘errors’ that have crept into the Bible when the word should be ‘variants.’ A variant is counted any time one copy is different from any other copy and it is counted again in every copy where it appears. So when a single word is spelled differently in 3,000 copies, that is counted as 3,000 variants. In fact, there are only 10,000 places where variants occur and most of those are matters of spelling and word order. There are less than 40 places in the New Testament where we are really not certain which reading is original, but not one of these has any effect on a central doctrine of the faith. Note: the problem is not that we don’t *know what* the text is, but that we are not *certain which* text has the right reading. We have 100 percent of the New Testament and we are sure about 99.5 percent of it.

“But even if we did not have such good manuscript evidence, we could actually reconstruct almost the entire New Testament from quotations in the church fathers of the second and third centuries. Only eleven verses are missing, mostly from 2 and 3 John. Even if all the copies of the New Testament had been burned at the end of the third century, we could have known virtually all of it by studying these writings.

“Some people have balked that inerrancy is an unprovable doctrine because it refers only to the original inspired writings, which we don’t have and not to the copies that we do have. But if we can be this certain of the text of the New Testament and have an Old Testament text that has not changed in 2,000 years, then *we don’t need the originals to know what they said*. The text of our modern Bibles is so close to the original that we can have every confidence that what it teaches is truth.”

(*When Skeptics Ask*, Victor Books, A Division of Scripture Press Publications, Inc. USA, Canada, England. 1990. p. 160).

Terry Hall adds the following words to the discussion:

“Are there 200,000 errors in all those Bible manuscripts? Yes and no. It’s more correct to talk about variations than errors, meaning differences among the

copies. And the number of variations is actually quite small. To arrive at the large figure, each variation is counted all of the times it occurs. For example, if 1,267 manuscripts read 'our Father' and the remainder have 'your Father,' this one letter change would count as 1,267 'errors' toward the total.

"When the Masoretes recorded all known variations in the Hebrew Old Testament (three fourths of the Bible), they amounted to an average of one per page of text. Computer analysis of all the known New Testament manuscripts reveals only 0.1 percent variance. That means that 99.9 percent of the manuscripts' contents are in perfect agreement.

"Most of the small percentage of actual differences are in spelling (such as the English 'honour' versus 'honor'), word order ('Paul the apostle' versus 'the apostle Paul'), and grammar ('Father *who* art in heaven' versus 'Father *which* art in heaven'.) And *none* of the variations affects any basic doctrine."

(*How the Bible Became a Book*, Victor Books, A Division of Scripture Press Publications, Inc. USA, Canada, England, 1990, p. 135)