

## **Editorial:**

### **How Important is Accuracy in A Course in Miracles?**

by Doug Thompson

Much ink has been spilled and many strong emotions have been vented over the question of “accuracy” in the respective versions and editions of ACIM. When I have pointed out that this or that one falls short in the accuracy department, I’ve often been met with rage and the protest “the differences are mostly only minor, it’s not that important.”

It took me some years to appreciate and empathize with that observation and the perspective from which accuracy truly isn’t a big deal and doesn’t really matter. I hope some of those I’ve raked over the coals through the years can forgive me my insensitivity to their perspective. I likewise hope they can develop some empathy for mine, whether or not they share it.

My background includes two sets of experiences which have shaped my habits about accuracy. I worked as a newspaper reporter and I spent some years in Biblical Studies at the University of Waterloo.

If you’re reading a newspaper story which says “the mayor announced a large new spending program for the city works department” you expect that to be accurate. But then “large” is a subjective comparative statement, “large” in relation to what? If you read, however, “Mayor Taylor announced a new spending program. He said ‘This large new investment of \$7.2 million will solve many of the city’s problems” you will expect those ARE his exact words, the spending *is* new and that the sum *is* \$7.2 million, not \$7.1 million nor \$7.3 million. You might not really care what the exact sum is but you expect, if you read it in a reputable newspaper, the quote will represent exactly the mayor’s words and that *if* the statement is incorrect, the reporter will go on to tell you that the mayor misreported it! You expect the reporter to have done his homework, got his facts straight, and you expect his editors to have proofread the typeset copy to make sure that what appeared on the newspaper page was, in fact, correct.

And if someone asks you “How much new money is Mayor Taylor wanting to spend” you fully

expect that you can answer, with confidence, that the sum is \$7.2 million. You read that in a trusted source.

If you are only interested in the fact that there is some significant new spending, the details of *exactly* how much are probably “not that important” to you. You might not care about a minor error or what the precise sum is, or even whether the quote from the mayor is precise so long as it captured the basic idea. But even if an error is unimportant to you in a given instance, what would you think of a newspaper that didn’t care and couldn’t be bothered “getting it right?”

As a reporter I learned that “getting it right” is extremely important, not because a minor error is crucial for most readers, but because the credibility of the newspaper is crucial to most readers. If we say it’s so, it had better *be so* and we had better double check to make sure it really *is so*! Even though many readers may not care, some always will!

In Biblical Studies the concern for accuracy borders on an obsession. People spend entire careers poring over ancient manuscript fragments of small portions of the Bible trying to determine the most original –and “accurate” – wording of a few passages. Many might reasonably wonder “why bother, who ca-

res about that degree of precision, the difference is not that important?”

To others, especially those of a religious bent who form beliefs, dogmas, and doctrines based on what the Biblical text actually says, it is important to have as much certainty as possible as to “what it actually says!”

How can we understand what it means if we don’t actually know what it says? Or if we think we know, but we’re actually reading a copying error?

Within weeks of my first reading of ACIM I came to understand it both as “contemporary scripture” and as a report on a remarkable and miraculous phenomenon. Jesus had shown up to Helen Schucman and had spoken to her over many years, and she reported what she heard. If getting the mayor’s exact wording right when reporting on that is important, how much more important it seemed to me to get Jesus’ exact words right!

In scholarship in almost any discipline, just as in Biblical scholarship and in journalism, accuracy is important. If you quote a source in an undergraduate essay and you quote that source incorrectly, you will be docked marks. If you’re a senior scholar writing for a peer-reviewed journal and you misreport a

source or your own data, your work will flunk the peer review. And it matters not how “important” your error is, what matters is that you stated as a fact something that is not a fact, your work therefore lacks rigor, and in this case “the devil *is* in the details.”

When I discovered the extent of the “minor” and “not very important” inaccuracies in some editions of ACIM, I felt this was a serious shortcoming that could be and needed to be rectified. I was genuinely nonplussed to discover that many did not share my view and my observations of inaccuracies were often met with “oh that’s just a minor difference, it’s not that important.” Quite often the observation was quite correct, the difference *was* minor and in itself, not very important to many.

Not everyone has a background which indoctrinates him in the disciplines of precision and accuracy, nor one which demands it. But then when you’re paying your phone bill of \$50.32 watch what happens when you send the phone company a cheque for \$50.31. We really do all have some experience of the importance of accuracy and precision.

If you don’t happen to share my opinion that ACIM’s source is Jesus and that the words of Jesus deserve the most accurate presentation possible, then I

shan’t try to convince you, I say “God Bless You” and I fully accept that for you it’s not important and I don’t need you to share my view.

If you are one of the many who really would, when reading any book, prefer to read what the author actually said rather than a “minor” misrepresentation of it, then you may appreciate what I’m trying to do here. If you are a scholar of any sort quoting Jesus in ACIM for any publication, you will want your quotes to be as accurate as possible and you will appreciate a source that is more accurate over one which is less accurate. You may also develop, as I have, compassion for those who don’t share your concern with precise rather than merely approximate accuracy. You may also share the view that for many people and for many purposes, precise accuracy really *isn’t* important!

When I quote the Bible to people I am often met with the very reasonable reservation “well we know that the Bible isn’t all that accurate in quoting Jesus, it got changed over the years, we can’t be sure that is really what he said.” As a Biblical Scholar I know that better than most. When the accuracy of a quote is uncertain, as is almost always the case with the Bible, the authority and credibility of the quoted statement suffers.

With the Bible we do not have any of the original manuscripts of the original authors. We know humans make mistakes when they copy, and we know that our oldest source material for the Bible is a copy of a copy of a copy separated from the original, usually by hundreds of years during which we have only the vaguest idea of what discrepancies might, or might not have entered.

With the Course we do have some of the original manuscripts of the Scribes, and in those we see differences, many of which are clearly copying mistakes. It is abundantly clear that the Scribes themselves did not think that getting a precisely accurate copy was all that important, because their own copies are riddled with obvious copying mistakes, and they never felt the need to proofread the material. I am certain however, that they had no idea just how *many* little copying mistakes there were. How could they know? They never proofread it.

Due to the survival of some of the original Scribal documents it is possible to identify many of those copying mistakes and thus correct them. How important is it? To some it is not important at all. To others it is very important indeed. To the former group my work will seem like a silly waste of time. To the latter group, my work will seem like an obvi-

ous necessity and they may, like me, marvel that no one bothered to make an attempt to “get ACIM right” before.

I need to add a caveat. While I’ve made every effort for exact and precise accuracy, I know that goal requires a great deal of time and effort. I know I can proofread a page ten times and still manage to overlook a mistake. I know this work is short of “perfection.” It is not offered as a completed project but as a step toward it. It’s not perfect but it is “more perfect” than anything else I know of.

I still caution the perfectionist to check my work against the actual manuscript facsimiles and let me know if any discrepancies are found. I am certain of this, we have not yet found all the errors!

While I have earned a modest amount of money from my work on ACIM, something like \$15,000 in donations and “profits” on the sale of books over the course of nine years, I have a full time job to pay the bills. My ACIM work is all done in my “spare time” as a necessarily “part time” hobby. I do it because I feel it is important. And I do it because it is enormously satisfying and gratifying and I feel called to do it.

I have another agenda. I want university students in “Comparative Religion” courses to be exposed to this material and until there is a credible, accurate edition of the Course available for university bookstores to order, very few professors will ever put it on the curriculum. It lacks *academic* credibility in inaccurate versions. The academic community requires, as a bare minimum, an accurate edition to study. In that community and for that audience, accuracy really is important and even “minor differences” that are avoidable are “unacceptable.”

Years ago I saw a cartoon of a monk poring over ancient manuscripts. In the balloon representing the monk’s thoughts were the words “Oh no! The word wasn’t CELIBATE it was CELEBRATE!” A “minor difference.” Just one letter left out.

After the Battle of Waterloo in 1814 news of Wellington’s victory was sent to London by “semaphore relay.” Men with flags on towers a few miles apart could relay brief messages much faster with such relays than men on horseback. Fog drifted in at one relay and interrupted the message. All that reached London were the words “Wellington defeated.” The third word of the message was “Napoleon.” A minor difference of just one word can sometimes be rather important.

When we peg our personal beliefs and teaching to the words and ideas of a written document, and many people do that with the Bible and with ACIM, accuracy is inevitably important and any “difference” is potentially “major.” Sure many don’t seem very important, but who can judge the importance of the differences not yet discovered?

I don’t know what all the differences are between versions. No one does. The basic scholarly work of identifying and cataloguing the differences has not been done. While many differences strike me as very minor indeed, who is to say, until all of them are identified and carefully studied, that *none* are “important?”

Then there is the “qualitative” vs. the “quantitative” debate. How many undocumented “minor” discrepancies does it take before one can say “this edition is substantially different?” I know of no hard and fast rule to apply but at some point the weight of thousands of “minor differences” adds up to at least one “significant difference.”

The metaphor I like for this comes from photography. Before the days of digital photography, when we worked with negatives and enlargers to make prints, dust specks were the bane of photo labs.

It was very hard to eliminate them entirely but a small number of specks would often escape notice and really were “not very important” usually. But if you get a lot of dust specks, the quality of the image begins to be significantly degraded. With enough dust specks, the image will be considered simply garbage. Where you draw the line is always subjective. It takes a huge number of dust specks to make an image unrecognizable and short of that threshold one can say that for some purposes “they aren’t very important.”

For some purposes ... indeed ... so what’s the purpose here? Do we seek to know, more or less *roughly* what Jesus said? Or do we seek to know *exactly* what Jesus said? In many editions of ACIM you can read most of what Jesus said, more or less, with only a few thousand “mostly minor” differences. Or you can read something likely to be closer to what he really said. It’s your choice.