



BLASTING THE VERY FOUNDATIONS OF CHRISTIANITY

Tremors of the Wrong Jesus

THE GREEN FORD TORINO hummed like a hornet beneath the setting sun. We'd passed twenty *See Rock City* signs. Our destination loomed ever closer. The mountains were in view, and my brother and I hadn't asked the "Are we there yet?" question for a good fifty miles. We were dormant doodlebugs in the backseat, hitching a ride on a hornet—destination, Rock City. We were in the last stage of a long haul over lush terrain, weary of semis hustling past us. We'd pumped our arms—imitating the pull of their horns—until we'd developed tennis elbow. And some had responded. Others chewed their gum and kept their hand hot on the CB mic. We'd had our road fun. We'd spotted ten Volkswagen Beetles, counting each one. But that was old now. We only wanted to know one thing: "How much longer?" We wanted to *get there*. We wanted to see Rock City. We were tired of each other. We'd smelled feet and bad breath long enough. We wanted out of the hornet. We wanted to know—

"Mom, how much longer?" It came out before I could stop it. I'd been warned.

She turned this time. We flinched, drawing back into our defensive modes. Our knees shot up. We fell back into the seat, elbows flashing

like shields. Then she slapped at us, but mostly hit the back of the seat. She hit my brother first, who whined, “I didn’t ask the question. Why are you hitting me?” She then aimed a slap at me. We tried not to laugh, then promised to stay quiet.

By the time we pulled into the Rock City parking lot, we were one big family in love with one another again. The adventure resumed. So did our father’s speech about behavior. “I’m only gonna say it once. And there won’t be a next time. We’ll go home. Is that what y’all want—to go home? ... Don’t think I’m lying. You just try me.”

Fatman’s Squeeze

Mom was right about Rock City. It was nothing but rocks. The first destination was Fatman’s Squeeze—a narrow passageway between two boulders. I’d pictured a motorized vise of some sort, something that would open and close, trying to catch people at just the right moment. Then it would squeeze them to smithereens. Buttons would fly. Eyes would pop out. This is when we’d turn our heads.

But it was nothing but two huge rocks. What a letdown. Then I noticed one woman in front of us. She was having a hard time making the pass. She was large, too large. She tried to go through without turning sideways. And I got excited. We finally had some action. I called back to Mom and Dad, who were bringing up the rear. “Hey, y’all, hurry up! You’re gonna miss it! A humongous woman is stuck. She’s getting the squeeze.”

“Shhhh!” Mom scolded me. “How would you like it if some bratty kid were laughing at you because of your weight? I hope she comes back here and sits on you. I won’t say a word, not one word.”

She smiled to the woman up the trail, who’d eventually turned sideways and worked her way through. It was a narrow escape. No fire-fighters or special rangers needed. She made it through. We weren’t even close.

After Fatman's Squeeze, we had this sinking feeling that things were heading downhill. Then we remembered the seven states.

Twenty miles from Rock City, we'd spotted a sign on a barn that read *See 7 States from Rock City*. Dad said, "All you got to do is drop your coin in the binoculars and *voilà!* Seven states pop into view. You think I'm lying, don't you?"

My brother and I shot each other a look. I knew my brother was about to respond.

"Dad, I don't think you can see seven states from up there. Toot said—"

"Aw, Toot don't know a *toot* about Rock City."

"Yes, he does! He's *been* there. He said you can't see anything but trees."

"And you believe him? I tell you what. You boys don't have a bit of gumption. The boy's never been out of Franklin."

We rode a couple of miles thinking about it. Toot wouldn't lie, would he? It was the first time we'd questioned Toot's authority. He was the oldest and the wisest kid in the neighborhood. But we'd never known him to leave the neighborhood. He was around every day, working or driving his restored '56 Chevy around the square in Franklin. But Dad had a point. We had a choice to make. Who were we to believe—our father or Toot? Would we choose the wise old man in the front seat with long sideburns, listening to "These Boots Were Made for Walking," or the cool kid with long hair and bell-bottom jeans, who listened to Led Zeppelin? It was a question of authority. No doubt about it, Dad was right. But we also understood what Toot was saying. We couldn't make out seven states atop Lookout Mountain, either. After all, there were no dotted lines separating the seven states. Where did the tree line meet the valley, and where did North Carolina butt up against Tennessee? You can't tell from up there. But you can see for miles and miles. And to believe that you could see seven states, you had to go on faith—

faith in the authority of whoever said you could see seven states in the first place.

I see seven states, but I see no way out.

It all boils down to a decision about authority. Everything does. C. S. Lewis wrote, “Ninety-nine per cent of the things you believe are believed on authority. I believe there is such a place as New York. I have not seen it myself. I could not prove by abstract reasoning that there must be such a place. I believe it because reliable people have told me so.”¹

Nowadays, it’s confusing. We have popular books and movies telling us that church historians have been wrong. They are trying to rewrite history by questioning authority. They are not denying the existence of Christ, only his divinity. This is a huge deception. Without divinity, Christ becomes just another great teacher, a prophet along the lines of Muhammad and other gurus. It is the same damnable deception we see in many of today’s novels and movies that debunk Christ’s divinity. “This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world” (1 John 4:3 NIV).

Dan Brown, of *The Da Vinci Code* fame, believes the church fathers lied and perpetuated the wrong history. He asserted in a recent radio interview, “The story in *The Da Vinci Code* is so well documented, historically, that the only reason it falls under conspiracy is because we all believe a different truth, and my question is: Which is conspiracy? Which version of the truth is actually conspiracy?”² How we answer this question will determine what we believe.

Dan Brown believes Constantine corrupted the authority of the church fathers. Brown believes that before Constantine, the church fathers all believed that Christ was a mortal man—only a prophet.³ It is nothing more than a case against authority. Who are you going to believe? A close study of Brown’s claims, and others like his,

reveals the flaws in their authority. If Jesus was only a teacher, then he died for nothing. He could have said, “Follow my teachings to discover eternal life.” And Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross would mean nothing; he died in vain. Millard Erickson compared it to a firefighter answering a three alarm. A house is burning on the west side of town. When the firefighter arrives, he discovers that not only is the house on fire, but the parents are overcome with smoke and unable to go back in for an infant child still within the burning house. So the firefighter rushes in and saves the child. But in the process he loses his life. The child is safe. The firefighter is dead. What an example! It makes front-page news.

Erickson wrote, “But suppose there is no child in the house, and the parents insist that there is no child, and the fireman himself believes that no one is in the house. If he nonetheless rushed into the house and died, would we be impressed by the example, or would we consider it to be a case of foolhardiness?”⁴ We would probably blurt out, “What a fool!”

Christ’s death was not, after all, for an empty house. He could have told us simply to follow his teachings. But the very Son of God had to die because mankind is powerless to uproot the evil embedded in us by the fall of man in the Garden of Eden. “The sin of this one man, Adam, caused death to rule over us, but all who receive God’s wonderful, gracious gift of righteousness will live in triumph over sin and death through this one man, Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:17). So the “death of Christ is an example, but only if it also is a substitutionary sacrifice.”⁵ Christ died in our place. He not only provides an example, he also gives us life—having died in our place. “But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. And since we have been made right in God’s sight by the blood of Christ, he will certainly save us from God’s judgment” (Rom. 5:8–9).

The Bible tells us why Christ’s sacrifice for remission of sins is so important to our salvation. A great example could not satisfy God’s

wrath. Christ's death would in that case be like a firefighter running into a burning building to save no one. Sheer stupidity. There would be nothing redeeming about it. The death of Christ would not have superseded Old Testament faith if it were only an example. The Bible says, "For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant" (Heb. 9:15 NIV).

Of course, in order to believe in the authority of the Bible, we have to believe the writers were inspired by God. We trust the Bible is telling us the truth the same way we believe in the rudiments of the science of topography. But there are those, like Toot, who believe that the authority of mapmakers is corrupt simply because we can't see the dividing lines marking out the literal borders that distinguish the states. Likewise, there are those, like Dan Brown, who question the authenticity of the Bible because he can't trust the authority of early church fathers. But somewhere—it doesn't matter who we are—we will have to take a leap of faith to believe the authority of any history.

C. S. Lewis wrote,

Every historical statement in the world is believed on authority. None of us have seen the Norman Conquest or the defeat of the Armada. None of us could prove them by pure logic as you prove a thing in mathematics. We believe them simply because people who did see them have left writings that tell us about them: in fact, on authority. A man who jibbed at authority in other things as some people do in religion would have to be content to know nothing all his life.⁶

If my father was right about being able to see seven states, then why was Toot wrong? Was he wrong because he denied mathematical

and topographical evidence? Could it be that he made his determination by the naked eye? Does this mean the authority is wrong?

We live in an era when people regard truth as subjective. There are no absolutes. But if we traveled to Rock City and climbed to the scenic view, what would we see? I might say, "I see seven states because I believe the authorities." And you might say, "I see only trees and valleys. I don't know how you can claim seven states. I see only four." Who is right? Topography or the naked eye?

This is what Dan Brown meant when he asked, "Which conspiracy are you going to believe?" He believes the church fathers were hiding the truth about Jesus' divinity. Which conspiracy are you going to believe? The church fathers or a secret code embedded in a painting? This brings the real argument to the forefront—the divinity of Christ.

What are the consequences if Dan Brown is right, and Jesus was merely a great teacher without divinity? Brown will someday have to stand before God on the merits of his own goodness. Was he good enough? Did he live a righteous life? Did he observe Christ's teachings closely enough? Did he sacrifice enough to follow Jesus' teachings? Isn't Dan Brown taking an enormous risk with his eternity?

What are the consequences if I'm right? I receive eternal life based upon the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ. I won't have to stand trial for my shortcoming. Christ stood trial and died in my place. He conquered death and the grave for me. I live eternally based on Christ's death.

You have to think about this, because this is the choice that Dan Brown and others like him are offering. It has nothing to do with how they interpret history. It has everything to do with how we interpret *Jesus* in history. Their history debacle is a smoke screen meant to throw you off the trail of grace. Without grace, we are bumbling idiots with no hope. Who can keep the law? It is as simple as that question.

Philip Yancey, in his book *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, wrote, "None of us gets paid according to merit, for none of us comes close to satisfying God's requirements for a perfect life. If paid on the basis of fairness, we would all end up in hell."⁷ Who wants to shoulder that kind of risk? There has to be divine intervention if we are to escape the wrath of God. "Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him" (Heb. 9:27–28 NIV).

How to Escape Wrath

My brother and I faced our parents' punishment on a continual basis. We were bad. Very bad. Maybe even brats. We would drive our mom to the tree that stood just outside our back door. "It's got some good switches on it," she'd say right before she made us cut one off. It was true. The branches made good switches. But in my mother's hands the first lash was usually about as bad as being hit with a wet noodle. All my brother and I had to do to get Mom to quit was act like she was killing us. We performed in a manner worthy of an Academy Award. We would thrash around on the living room floor as if bees swarmed in our pants, and when Mom left the room, we'd imitate her and laugh. We deserved every whipping we ever got.

Mom was easy, but when Dad got mad enough to punish you, it was a "whuppin'." That's a Southern expression that means Daddy bypassed Mom's tree and headed straight to the woodpile. My father meant business. I knew this. So one day when he threatened me, I ran across the street to my aunt Louise's house, and I told her I was about to get a whuppin'.

"Is that right, child? What did you do?" Aunt Louise asked.

"I didn't do nothing. I promise."

She knew I was guilty of something, but said, "Come in here to the

bathroom and we'll fix this." And she commenced to putting toilet paper down the rear of my pants. "Now go on back over there and take your punishment."

So I did, and my father said, "Boy, don't you ever run from me again." Then he turned me around to administer my punishment and said, "What do you have in your pants?"

"Aunt Louise did it, Daddy! I didn't have nothing to do with it! Aunt Louise did it!"

That is when he did the unexpected. He burst out laughing. I stared at him for a moment, and then realized that I'd escaped a whuppin'! Aunt Louise was a mastermind—the advocate for the weak and guilty! She'd single-handedly warded off a whuppin'.

Aunt Louise is like Jesus. He puts the toilet paper at the back of our souls, absorbing the fury of God's just wrath. Christ's work on the cross took away God's wrath toward mankind. "And since we have been made right in God's sight by the blood of Christ, he will certainly save us from God's judgment" (Rom. 5:9).

This is about as simple as it can be. The rest is up to you. Don't be deceived by conspiracy theories over history and hidden clues in paintings. The choice is not over history but over what we believe about grace and the divinity of Christ. Each of us has to take a leap of faith, no matter which side we are on. Our very existence requires faith. To have faith is to believe that there is more to life than meets the eye. It is to believe in seven states, even though we can't distinguish them from a mountaintop. Faith is a combination of both risk and assurance. "What is faith? It is the confident assurance that what we hope for is going to happen. It is the evidence of things we cannot yet see" (Heb. 11:1). What we hope for with the eyes of faith becomes a certainty, even though we can't see it. As Frederick Buechner has said, "What we need to know, of course, is not that God exists, not just that beyond the steely brightness of the stars there is a cosmic intelligence of some kind that keeps the whole

show going, but that there is a God right here in the thick of our day-by-day lives ... as we move around down here knee-deep in the fragrant muck and misery and marvel of the world.”⁸

No one can know everything with absolute certainty. Just make sure you know the consequences of each side of the argument. Then choose wisely. Your eternity is at stake.