



# Scholarship

**J. Paul Reno**

**“I Don’t Know”  
Scholarship**

**By**

**J. Paul Reno**

**Presented at**

**Dean Burgon Society**

**July 2006**

## **“I Don’t Know’ Scholarship”**

I will explain the title as quickly as I can. It isn't "I-Don't-Know Scholarship," which would be poor English, but rather it is a kind of scholarship that is based on the phrase "I don't know." It seems that somehow we have moved into an age and stage where this is the mark of scholarliness, to be able to say "I don't know" to what other people do know.

My text is in II Timothy 3:7. There will be some other texts we will look at, but it is a well known text. It speaks of those of the apostasy, who are ever learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth. These are ever learning and that is why they think they are scholars, but they are never able to come to the knowledge of the truth. This raises the question of whether they are real scholars, the process of learning versus the product of learning. Whenever you confront them with certain facts, they say, "Well, I don't know about that, I don't know where I stand on this, or I don't know quite how to handle it." Somehow it has

become a way of thought. It has also become a way of speech. They feel that by answering, "I don't know" to certain key Bible issues, they are not only intellectually but also morally superior to the rest of us. We know things they don't know, and that makes them better. I have trouble understanding their logic, and that is why I decided to speak a little along this line.

The context of the passage has to do with apostasy. I am not saying they are apostates, I am just saying they talk like it, they act like it, and it raises some real issues. These people are ever learning, studying, writing, reading, taking classes, getting degrees, but they never come to a knowledge of the truth; they never get settled on it so that they really know things. This context of the passage of apostasy has some marks that we might recognize, of those who never come to a settled conclusion regarding basic issues that have to do with truth. Now in some areas, they will come to conclusions, but on others they would rather not have a definite conclusion. These are the kind that

are always learning, but they “just don’t know.” They are always saying this. They have a form of godliness, but when it comes to power, they by-pass the source. They are not settled on the matter of power. They are teachers; they are able to gather people together by dealing with such subjects as those that itch ears. They will scratch those itching ears, but the danger is they turn them from the truth and they are later turned aside unto fables, as you see in chapter 4. You will find that they have unholy products. These are just some of the marks of the context of this matter of ever learning, never coming to the knowledge of the truth.

When I was doing some undergraduate work to become a school teacher, I attended Central State University in Ohio, and one of the courses we were required to take was Major Issues and Personalities. They wanted us informed on the issues of the day and the personalities that were involved. It was a rather high sounding series of lectures about which we had to write papers. I would like to lay out some

of the issues and personalities we have run into in this know-nothing movement.

In the 1800's there was a political movement that lasted for several elections. I have forgotten the name of the party, but the nickname for the party was "Know-Nothing." They wanted to run their party based on personalities, men's names and reputations; but when it came to the actual issues and sorting things out, the people were instructed to say, "I don't know" or "I know nothing about that." That way they gave no issues to the opponents to fight. Fortunately, that party died in the political realm. However, unfortunately, we see the same mentality in the spiritual realm where they will just avoid matters by saying, "I don't know." It is as if doubt or lack of knowledge is superior to real answers.

Consider this matter of "I don't know." What would happen if a math teacher were to ask, "How much is seven times twenty-three?" and the student responds, "Well, I don't know. There are a number of different opinions, and I don't know that

I need to agree with any of them. I don't know." I am sure the teacher would say, "My, what a scholar!"

"When did the War of 1812 start?" "I don't know; I don't know."

"How do you spell cat?" "I am not sure; I am still struggling with 'potato,' whether it ends with an 'o' or an 'e,' so I don't know."

Suppose a business man was asked about his product and he said, "I will take the moral high ground; I don't know." You may ask a lawyer for advice, and he answers, "I don't know." You ask your banker about your money and where it is, and he says, "I don't know." You go to a doctor and ask, "What is going on here?" "I don't know." That is the best answer to give. Some politicians might still borrow on that idea these days, but when it comes to the Bible issue, it is very popular to say, "I don't know." "I don't know." My, what scholarliness! If we could teach our seminary students this in the first day, the first class, they might not need so

many classes, until they find out how many things they are not supposed to know.

Let me see if I can cite from practical experience. I was in Utah visiting a missionary for a short time, and he had a new Bible commentary of several volumes in length. We opened up one to look at a certain passage and though I cannot tell you exactly how it read, it sort of went like this: "Some feel that the Greek word for this is such-and-such, which means the following might be so; and others feel the Greek word might be this or that." Then they would offer a third opinion and would say, "Because we are not sure which Greek word it is, we are not sure what this passage means." This was supposed to be a commentary of high intellectual repute. What they were saying was, the high road is "I don't know."

When you look at the Nestle Aland approach to creating a modern Greek text, they grade the various readings. They might say, "We don't know for sure whether this was the right one or not, but we give preference to this one or to that



one.” Occasionally they have to do a revision, and sure enough, there are bound to be more revisions, because they still don’t know what the Bible says. They are still trying to sort it out. This is the form of scholarliness that liberals have provided, and many others have bought into.

Not long ago Back to the Bible published a booklet saying they had finally gotten the text issue settled to about 99% accuracy. I have studied math a little and have tried to figure: if you don’t know what a 100% is, how do you know you have 99% of the 100? If you do know the 100%, why are you hanging onto only the 99? If there is 1% in question, how do you know there is not more in question? Their view is that on the whole thing we don’t know, but on some parts they are rather convinced. Apparently they can take part of it by faith, but certainly not all of it. The argument of the oldest manuscripts is sort of a curious one, because who knows what they will find next week that will shatter everything they formerly believed.

One of the questions that I have run into with young preachers out of some of our supposedly KJV-supporting schools is: "Brother Reno can you explain to me why you believe you know you have the Word of God, every word of it?" So I start to explain. They counter with, "Well, I just don't know; there are a lot of good men on both sides." I may respond, "How good can a man be when he is on the wrong side of the Bible issue?" When discussing this with one missionary, I was told that he could see both sides, so he didn't know what side he wanted to defend. This "I don't know" mentality of ever learning, but never getting settled on what is the truth is widespread.

I rode in a vehicle in the jungles of the Amazon once with two missionaries. The one asked the other one, "Why are you holding to such-and-such a text in the Portuguese?" He said, "Because it is based on the best of the right scriptures." The first fellow questions, "What makes you say that?" He was told, "Because I have been listening to Paul Reno." The first then turned to me saying, "You tell

me then.” I explained, “Because there are scholars who have studied this. There is an accurate, precise and unchangeable text behind both the Old and New Testaments.” He said, “Well, I just don’t know what to believe on this.” He thought he had played the trump card that had settled the issue. It didn’t, but he was satisfied with his “don’t know” position.

With this “don’t know” position, there are many things in question. They don’t know anything for sure. They don’t have a sure Word of God. They don’t know which, if any, Bibles or manuscripts to count on. They just don’t know; it is not a settled issue. They claim to be Bible believers, but they don’t know which Bible they believe. They think that as long as they hold to this position, they can be non-offensive and non-divisive. They can be unbiased. They feel that they don’t have to be dogmatic; they feel that they can be superior and scholarly.

Recently a group of churches and ministers left a denomination that was going neo-evangelical. They were trying to tie some things down, but they

said there were two things they weren't going to take a position on- the nature of the gospel and what is the Bible. They said those issues would further divide them. There are a lot of groups that feel that way, and that is how they finesse the subject. Ever learning and never really coming to the knowledge of the truth.

They think that there's no need to learn how to defend themselves. They don't feel they have to take sides. They don't have to study and come to a conclusion or a classification or a conviction on what the word of God really is. It is a real problem when you come down to it. I think of a missionary who became soft on the New King James Version. He tried to hide this in the churches when he was home raising support. Years later his son came and asked me about these Bible issues. He decided he liked the "I don't know" position. Then he married a girl who did know, and they decided to go to the mission field. They agreed to use the King James in their ministry. She, however, could read whatever version she wanted, have devotions in what she

wanted, study from what she wanted, so long as what she used in her actual teaching was the Authorized Version. The reason for this was the convictions of those who supported them. Thus if you ask them, "Do you use the King James Version exclusively?" they would reply, "Of course, in our public ministry." This sort of reminds me of the argument I heard when I was in college: "Now, we all know that there are a lot of errors in the King James, but the people like it, so that is what we will use. However, in our studies, we'll use something else."

I know a missionary to Scotland who reversed his position of knowing what God had actually said to not knowing, because he had been to a certain school. I asked him, "Just how are you going to instruct your converts regarding Christ's teaching that man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceedeth from the mouth of God?" He responded, "I know where you are headed, but I just don't know what to do." I keep hearing this, "I don't know," "I don't know," "I

don't know." Somehow they think that is an acceptable answer. In Tennessee I was discussing with a relative a serious matter regarding a professedly saved but practicing homosexual. She asked what I thought. I told her several things, and then I started quoting scriptures. As soon as I did, she countered, "Well now, we don't know for sure that's the right translation. We don't know for sure that is what He said. We don't know." It was almost as if the "I don't know" view on the Bible excuses one from having to obey it.

I talked to a mechanic just recently, and he raised an issue that he had faced in his life. He was a member of a "fundamental, KJV church" of good repute in the community. He said, "I talked with my pastor, and he told me that we know what the Bible says on this subject, but sometimes the Bible just doesn't work."

Back when the Iron Curtain was intact, I visited in what are today the Czech and Slovak Republics. I ran into pastors who had received smuggled NIV Bibles, and they raised the issue of

an uncertain text to me. They had been told that all scholars agree. I said, "No, I can name scholars that don't, scholars that believe we have God's inspired words in the Masoretic and Received texts." They told me, "Well, we don't know what to believe," as if that would excuse having to face the facts. Once I was even invited to speak to the so-called scholars at the Czech Bible Society about a possible revision of their Bible. They too were an "I don't know" group. Most of what I laid down, as far as what the Bible taught regarding the scriptures, they excused with, "Well, we don't know; we don't know." They wanted to do a revision without knowing for sure the key issues of the Bible. We need to understand just how far this ignorant mania has spread.

I spoke recently with a missionary in Athens, Greece. One of the young men he has been developing and working with in personal evangelism, had been witnessing to another Greek. The inquirer wanted to discuss Christianity and its teachings as long as the Bible was not used as a

reference. Can you imagine discussing Christianity without the Bible being the final authority?

I think a lot of people have just turned the Bible off, because they have heard so much of this “I don’t know” that they themselves don’t know. I had a Reformed Baptist pastor come see me at a conference in New York, and he asked me, “How could I be so sure of what God said?” I started explaining inspiration, and he said, “If you believe that, you believe in preservation, and I can understand your position. But I just don’t know about those things.”

In Ohio, I was taught in a Baptist college that we don’t know about I John 5:7, we don’t know about the last verses of Mark 16. They gave us a whole list of what they didn’t know and said we should never use what we don’t know about. They were teaching unbelief.

In Panama I had students who could speak a little English come to me and say, “We understand that you believe there is a Bible that is totally trustworthy.” I said, “Yes!” They questioned, “Why



do you believe that? How did you come to that conclusion? Can you send us any materials we might be able to read in English, our second language?" Some of these students are helping to start missions and are active in churches. They have young minds and are seeking to know whether there is a Bible text that can be trusted. Ever learning but never coming to the knowledge of the truth is an apostasy that is spreading around the world and having some very drastic effects.

Now when it comes to the Bible, can we know or do we not know? In John chapter 20, there was a woman who didn't know. She had gone to the grave, and she said, "*We know not where they have laid Him.*" But she sure did want to find out instead of being left in that condition. Thomas, in John 14:5 said, "*We know not whither thou goest.*" But he surely did want to know; it was not a case of wanting to stay in ignorance. In John 9, we read of the religious leaders at the synagogue after the healing of the blind man. They quizzed his parents, who said twice in verse 21, "*We know not...we*

*know not...ask him.*” They found a place to hide in, “We know not.” When the Pharisees themselves were confronted by the blind man, they said, “We know not.” So this “I don’t know” mentality is not a new thing. It has been around for centuries.

There are some real dangers in this, “I don’t know” philosophy. Satan said, “Yea hath God said,” and Eve wasn’t too sure about what God had specifically said. She rephrased what He had said. Cain might have complained he didn’t know exactly what God wanted in a sacrifice. Abraham might have wondered whether he really knew that God wanted him to have a son by Sarah, so he went to Hagar. Lot may have thought there was a question about wicked cities, so he went down to Sodom. The people at Kadesh Barnea may not have known if they wanted to go into the promise land. Moses was told to speak to the rock the second time, but he didn’t know; he just went ahead and hit it the second time and it cost him terribly. Perhaps David didn’t know how serious God was about not committing adultery. This could explain his gazing

at Bathsheba. Saul didn't know that he had to be so precise when dealing with the Amalekites. Consider Achan's not knowing the cost of his disobediences; Samson about marrying Philistine women; or Jonah's thinking he could really choose where to minister. "I don't know" can cause big trouble. That is what the Bible teaches. Now Jephthaea did know and stood faithful. Elijah could stand on Mount Carmel and say, "*Choose ye this day...*" In Matthew 28:20, Jesus told us to be teaching them "*to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.*" We must be able to know what Jesus actually said for us to be able to teach it.

There are some real issues with this "I don't know." They say, "I don't know whether God gave us actual words. I don't know which words were originally given." Not everybody would go all the way through this list, but I want you to see how one thing leads to another, even if it takes a generation or two.

- "I don't know what words might be missing."

- “I don’t know what words might have been added.”
- “I don’t know what words might have been changed.”
- “I don’t know if the same authors would use the same words today that they used back then.”
- “I don’t know whether different authors would say the same thing or at least use the same words.”
- “Who knows how Peter would have written Ephesians.”
- “I don’t know whether we have the precise, distinct thoughts that were on the writers’ minds, or maybe something got lost in the process.”
- “I don’t know how verbal formal equivalence really applies in translation today.”
- “I don’t know whether the dynamic equivalence is really working in our churches.”

- “I don’t know if thought preservation actually occurred, or maybe it was corrupted in the process.”
- “I don’t know whether thought translation is really helpful.”
- “I don’t know if we are properly getting the message across.”
- “Maybe that is the answer, not the actual words, not even the thoughts, just the message, maybe with even different thought patterns and ideas put in. If you have read any part of the message, you will be absolutely frustrated from time-to-time.”
- “I don’t know if we will ever know what was written specifically and what God intended for us to follow.”

If a student had that many “I don’t knows,” he would be told to do his homework and to study harder. One thing they seem to know is that they can take great confidence in fables. When you turn from the truth, you are turned unto fables. They can believe the fable about the Septuagint

more than they can the verbal inspiration of the New Testament, and they will defend that. "I don't know" leads to some strange conclusions. The Bible says in Psalm 12:6, "*The words of the Lord are pure words: as silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times.*" They responded, "I don't know about that." Well, God said it. God said in I Peter 1:23, "*Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God which liveth and abideth for ever.*" They may say, "Well, we think the Bible was corrupted. Besides, we don't see the need to use uncorrupted scriptures to get people to make decisions. The Bible says in II Peter 1:19, "*We have also a more sure word of prophecy.*" They say, "It is not all that certain to us; we don't know what to believe." In Isaiah 8:20 we read, "*To the law and to the testimony, if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.*"

Jesus knew what the Bible said, and that it was right, and He never corrected so much as a

jot or tittle. John could know about the word of God, because he was willing to die for it on the Isle of Patmos. Peter knew. Paul knew. Isaiah knew. Jeremiah knew. Ezekiel knew. And yet many think it is scholarly to say, "I don't know." I John makes it clear; the key word of the book is "know." Jesus, praying to the Father, says, "*This is eternal life, that they may know thee the only true God and Jesus Christ whom thou has sent.*" There is a premium on knowledge in the Bible, but in the schools and pulpits the premium seems to be on not knowing. The Pharisees wanted to know whether John the Baptist was the Christ. John the Baptist sent his disciples to question Jesus so he could know for sure if Jesus was who He seemed to be. These people all knew. They wanted to know; that was their desire. They were not satisfied with anything less than knowing.

There is a Greek word for "I don't know," agnostic meaning no knowledge, I don't know,

ever learning but not knowing, never coming to the knowledge of the truth. This is the battle that we fight. Brethren, we live in times where many are ever learning, but they don't want to come to the knowledge of the truth. They could, but they don't want to hear it, they don't want to debate; they don't want to read about it. They just want to say, "I don't know," and excuse themselves, feeling superior. Brethren, I don't believe that is real scholarship.