

30 Foundations 101 - Can We Trust the Text... How We Got Our Bible

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I have been struggling to figure out some new content.

My book is about the castles we build to protect ourselves.

And in that book, I ultimately point to the chief architect.

The King who relentlessly, but patiently, pursues us.

I try to give evidence for what has happened in my own life that has led me to that conclusion.

But each of us has a different story.

Different experiences.

Different things that have shaped how we see the world.

I realize some of you reading this may not share my faith.

But maybe there's a part of you that wants to – if you could just get past certain things that bother you about Christianity.

I mean Christianity specifically.

Not Christ.

Because, let's be honest, it is very difficult to find fault with Jesus Christ as He is presented in the Gospels as the Savior of mankind.

What we often struggle with is Christianity.

The institution.

The people who claim the name and live in a way that contradicts the very One they claim to follow.

So I'm asking you to join me on a journey.

A series called **Foundations**.

Where I will try to tackle some of the common arguments that keep people from making a choice with eternal consequences.

Where This Started for Me

In 1994, God put a desire in me to teach His word.

But to teach His word, I first had to understand it.

And I realized something humbling.

Even though I had already been a Christian for twenty years by that point –

I did not fully understand His word.

If I'm honest with you, it's been thirty-two years since that realization.

And there are still aspects I don't understand.

Somewhere along the way, I became content with that.

Content to say: for what I don't understand, the Holy Spirit is far more knowledgeable than I am.

I yield to Him in the areas I cannot fully grasp on my own.

Why I'm Starting This

I do not have the intellect, the training, or the command of the English language that my Christian heroes had.

I am no C.S. Lewis.

No Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

No A.W. Tozer.

What I am is a Berean.

Acts 17 tells us about a group of believers in the city of Berea, and Scripture says something remarkable about them:

“Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so.” (Acts 17:11, LSB)

They didn't just accept what Paul told them because he sounded convincing.

They went and checked for themselves.

That's what this series is.

Not me telling you what to believe.

An invitation to examine the Scriptures daily, the way the Bereans did, and see for yourself whether these things are so.

I share the same concern that drove Lewis, Bonhoeffer, and Tozer to write in the first place.

I just don't share their gifts.

So I'll offer what I do have – patience, and a willingness to look closely.

Today's Claim

Here's what we're starting with, because it's probably the most common objection I hear:

"The Bible has been translated so many times, there's no way it's still accurate."

Maybe you've said this yourself.

Maybe someone said it to you, confidently, and you didn't have a response ready.

Let's look at what's actually true.

The Picture Most People Have in Their Head

Here's the mental image behind this objection, even if nobody says it out loud.

Someone imagines a single ancient scroll.

That scroll gets translated into a second language.

Someone translates *that* translation into a third language.

Then a fourth. Then a fifth.

Like the childhood game of telephone – a message passed from person to person, mouth to ear, until the final version barely resembles the original.

If that's how we got the Bible, the objection would be completely fair.

But that's not how it happened.

Not even close.

What Actually Happened

Modern Bible translations are not translations of translations.

They go back to the original languages directly.

When scholars translate the New Testament into English today, they aren't working from an old English Bible and updating the wording. They are working from Greek manuscripts – the language the New Testament was actually written in.

The Old Testament translators work from Hebrew and Aramaic – the languages Moses, David, and the prophets actually wrote in.

Every modern translation starts over, from the original language, every time.

So the real question isn't "how many times has this been translated."

The real question is: how do we know the Greek and Hebrew manuscripts we're translating from are trustworthy in the first place?

That's called **textual criticism**.

Not "criticism" in the sense of tearing something down.

Criticism in the sense of careful, comparative examination.

Imagine This

Here's a way to picture what textual criticism actually does.

Imagine a handwritten letter is copied by hand, by a different person, in a different city.

Then that copy is copied again. And again. Hundreds of times, over hundreds of years, spreading across an entire region.

Now imagine finding 5,800 of those copies today.

Some very old. Some newer. Some just a fragment. Some containing the whole document.

Scholars lay all 5,800 copies side by side and compare them, word by word, letter by letter.

Where they agree – and they agree the overwhelming majority of the time – you can be extremely confident you've found the original wording.

Where they differ, scholars can usually tell exactly where a scribe made a small error, and reconstruct what the original almost certainly said.

This is not guesswork. It's forensic reconstruction, done at a scale unmatched by any other ancient document in human history.

That 5,800 number is not an estimate I made up.

It's the actual number of surviving Greek New Testament manuscripts we have today.

Compared to What?

Numbers only mean something next to other numbers.

So let's compare.

Homer's *Iliad* – one of the most celebrated and trusted texts from the ancient world – survives in roughly 1,800 manuscripts.

The New Testament has **more than three times that**.

The gap between the original writing and our earliest copy matters too.

For most classical texts we consider historically reliable – Plato, Aristotle, Herodotus – the gap between the original and the earliest surviving copy is **500 to 1,000 years or more**.

The gap for the New Testament is roughly 200 years, and shrinking as older fragments continue to be discovered.

If we trust Julius Caesar's *Gallic Wars*, and we typically do, from just ten surviving manuscripts a thousand years removed from the original – we have far more reason to trust a document backed by thousands of manuscripts a fraction of that distance from the source.

No other ancient document comes close to this level of manuscript support.

“But Doesn't It Have Thousands of Errors?”

You may have heard this claim too, often paired with the first one.

Yes – there are textual variants across all those manuscripts.

But here's what almost never gets mentioned alongside that fact.

The overwhelming majority of variants are things like spelling differences, word order, or a scribe accidentally repeating a line – the kind of small human error you'd expect from thousands of people hand-copying a long document over centuries.

Scholars are in near-universal agreement that no core Christian doctrine is put in doubt by any of these variants.

Not one.

The differences are real. They are also, almost without exception, trivial – and they are exactly the kind of thing that having thousands of manuscripts to compare actually helps us catch and correct.

More copies don't create more doubt. They create more confidence.

Handling It Accurately

Paul wrote to Timothy:

“Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.” (2 Timothy 2:15, LSB)

I love that phrase – **accurately handling**.

It doesn't say blindly accept.

It says handle it accurately. Examine it. Study it. Be a Berean.

That is exactly what this series is for.

Where We Go From Here

Next time, we'll look at a related question – **who decided what actually belongs in the Bible, and why.**

You may have heard that the canon was chosen by powerful men for political reasons centuries after the fact.

That claim doesn't hold up either, and I'll show you why.

For now, I hope this gives you something solid.

The next time someone tells you the Bible can't be trusted because it's "been translated so many times," you'll know that's not actually how we got the book in your hands.

You'll know where to look instead.

And that is exactly the kind of foundation worth standing on.

For Further Study

I don't want you to just take my word for any of this.

Go be a Berean – a critical thinker.

Here are a few places to start, if you want to examine these claims yourself:

On manuscript counts and the comparison to other ancient texts – the Christian Research Institute's "The Bibliographical Test Updated" (www.equip.org) walks through the numbers in detail, including where older apologetics material has been outdated by newer scholarship.

Apologist and professor Sean McDowell has a regularly updated summary of the most current New Testament manuscript numbers at www.seanmcdowell.org, sourced from academic manuscript databases.

For a deeper look at how textual variants are studied and why they don't threaten core doctrine, Dr. Daniel Wallace – a leading textual critic and founder of the Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts – has written extensively on this, including his paper "The Number of Textual Variants: An Evangelical Miscalculation," widely available online.

If you'd rather read a full book on the subject, Josh McDowell's *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* remains the classic resource on manuscript and historical evidence, now in a fully updated edition – this is a very comprehensive and thick volume, I listened to the audiobook version and found it very enlightening.

None of these sources are asking you to trust them blindly either.

They show their work. Look at the footnotes. Follow the citations. Be a Berean.

If you're struggling:

- Christian Faith-Based Resources: <https://mentalhealthhotline.org/christian-faith-resources/> or call 1-866-903-3787 (24/7)
- Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 988 (call or text)

You matter. Whatever doubts you're wrestling with right now – you don't have to sort them out alone. Please stay.

William James Meyer is the author of "Do You Live in a Castle? Breaking Free from the Walls That Hold You Hostage." He writes from a Christian perspective as a fellow traveler – no scholar, no Lewis, no Bonhoeffer, just a Berean trying to examine the Scriptures daily and share what he finds.

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