

31 Foundations 102 - Who Decided What's In the Bible?

August 19, 2026

Last time, we looked at whether the text of the Bible has been preserved accurately and we showed that, historically, it is the most well documented text in existence – granted, that doesn't make it true, but it dismisses the claim that it cannot be accurate for being so old.

This time, we're asking who decided which books belong in the Bible in the first place?

I realize with some of my claims that I run the risk of building up straw man arguments – making an objection that may or may not be an accurate assessment of what you believe or what you are contending with in the public square.

For example, in this article I'm addressing the popularized version of this claim – that a room of bishops voted the canon into existence at Nicaea. If your objection – or a friend's – is more nuanced than that, stick with me, because the deeper answer still applies. The books weren't recognized because of institutional power in the 4th century. They were already being read, trusted, and used by churches independently of each other, over two hundred years earlier – long before anyone in the 4th century had any power to exercise.

That being said, I think this series is valid enough to get the point across even if all the details may vary slightly with the questions you face.

Today's Claim

“The Bible was assembled by powerful men, centuries after Christ, for political reasons.”

Sometimes it comes with a specific accusation attached – that a Roman emperor and a room full of bishops voted the Bible into existence at the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD.

Let's look at what we know from historical records.

But first I'd like to talk about misinformation in media.

Often we'll read articles and posts, or read books, or watch shows and movies, that give us a perspective distorted by the author's worldview – their bias. Everyone has bias. That's exactly why it's important to be a critical thinker.

And now there's an even greater danger looming... AI.

Why do I say danger? Because AI is programmed, and those doing the programming are biased, like all of us. If their bias leans toward a disbelief in God, how easy would it be for that to shape, even subtly, the way information gets presented?

This is often called algorithmic bias (and yes, I had to look that up), and while it's usually unintentional, baked in simply from the data a system is trained on, it can also be more

deliberate. Either way, the result is the same: content that quietly shapes how you think about something, without you ever realizing you're being shaped.

Thanks to a certain bestselling novel and its movie adaptation, a lot of people picture this scene:

A council of bishops.

A room full of competing gospels spread out on a table.

A vote.

Books that won the vote went in.

Books that lost were burned, banned, or hidden away... the "lost gospels" some claim were suppressed to protect the power of the church.

It's a dramatic picture but it's also almost entirely fiction.

What Nicaea Was Really About

The Council of Nicaea happened in 325 AD that much is true.

But it had nothing to do with choosing the biblical canon.

Nicaea was called to settle a dispute about the nature of Christ – specifically, a teaching called Arianism, which claimed Jesus was a created being rather than eternally God.

The council addressed the deity of Christ. Not which books belonged in Scripture.

None of the surviving records from the council – not the official minutes, not the eyewitness accounts of people who were actually there – mention any discussion of the canon at all.

The idea that Nicaea created the Bible is a myth with a traceable origin.

So if it wasn't Nicaea, how did we actually get the twenty-seven books of the New Testament?

The key is in the word – canon.

It comes from a Greek word meaning **measuring rod**.

A ruler. A standard used to check whether something is straight and true.

Think of the plumb line a builder uses to make sure a wall isn't leaning.

To borrow from my 'castle' book, the early church wasn't inventing a wall. They were checking which stones already fit the standard that had been there from the beginning.

That standard included several consistent measures, applied by the whole church over time:

Apostolic origin. Was the book written by an apostle, or by someone with direct, verified connection to an apostle?

Orthodoxy. Did the book's teaching agree with what the apostles had consistently taught, passed down from church to church?

Widespread acceptance. Was the book actually being read, trusted, and used in worship across many different churches, in different regions, independently of each other?

These were not new categories invented in the 4th century.

They were already in use over two hundred years earlier.

Long Before Nicaea

A document called the Muratorian Fragment, written somewhere around 170 to 200 AD, lists most of the books in our New Testament today – over a century before Nicaea ever took place.

Church leaders in the early 2nd century were already quoting from the Gospels, Paul's letters, and other New Testament books, treating them as Scripture, the same way they treated the Old Testament.

The core of the New Testament was already functioning as Scripture in the life of the church almost as soon as the ink was dry.

Nothing about this was sudden.

Nothing about this was political.

It was slow, careful, and consistent recognition – not invention.

So What Happened in 367 AD?

In 367 AD, a bishop named Athanasius wrote a letter to the churches under his care.

In it, he listed exactly the twenty-seven books that make up our New Testament today.

Word for word, the same twenty-seven books you'd find in a Bible on your shelf right now.

This is often pointed to as the moment the canon was "decided."

But Athanasius himself never claimed to be creating anything.

He was writing down what the church, across many regions, had already widely recognized for generations.

Later councils – Hippo in 393 AD, and Carthage in 397 AD – formally affirmed the same list.

Affirmed. Not created.

By the time those councils met, this question had already been substantially settled by the ordinary, decentralized practice of the church for well over two hundred years.

What About the “Lost Gospels”?

You may have heard of texts like the Gospel of Thomas or the Gospel of Judas – books sometimes described as suppressed alternatives to the “official” story.

We’ll spend a full article on these later in this series, because they deserve careful treatment.

But here’s the short version for now.

These books were not excluded by a vote.

They failed the same standard that had always been in place – most were written far too late to have any direct apostolic connection, many contradicted core apostolic teaching, and none achieved the kind of widespread, independent recognition the accepted books had.

They weren’t hidden. They simply never measured up to the standard the church had always been using.

Handed Down, Not Handed Out

Jude, writing in the first century, gives us a phrase worth thinking about:

“I felt the necessity to write to you exhorting that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints.” (Jude 1:3, LSB)

Handed down.

Not handed out at a meeting.

Not voted into existence by a council centuries later.

Something received, passed carefully from one generation of believers to the next, guarded and recognized rather than manufactured.

That is exactly the picture the historical evidence supports.

Where We Go From Here

Next time, we’ll look at those “lost gospels” directly – what they actually say, why the early church didn’t accept them, and how many of their core ideas have quietly resurfaced in modern spirituality without most people realizing where they came from.

For now, I hope this gives you something solid.

The Bible you hold wasn’t assembled in a back room by men protecting their power.

It was recognized, over centuries, by a church using the same measuring rod the whole time.

For Further Study

Go be a Berean.

On the Nicaea myth specifically, The Gospel Coalition's article "No, Nicaea Didn't Create the Canon" (thegospelcoalition.org) walks through the historical record in detail, including where the myth actually originated.

For a full academic treatment of canon formation, The Biblical Canon Lists from Early Christianity by Edmon Gallagher and John Meade is considered one of the most thorough modern resources, compiling the actual canon lists from the early centuries side by side.

Christian History Institute has a readable overview of Athanasius's 367 AD letter and its role at christianhistoryinstitute.org.

One More Thing

I brought up the dangers of AI earlier, and I think this is worth investigating a little further.

These systems are trained on massive amounts of text – articles, books, forums, reviews, conversations, all pulled largely from the internet. What that means is the patterns an AI has learned to reproduce are shaped by whatever ideas, framing, and assumptions appear most often, and most consistently, in that material.

But it's not quite that simple either. On top of that raw data, the companies building these systems make deliberate choices about what to weigh more heavily and how the system should behave. A relatively small number of people are making judgment calls that shape what millions of users see as a "reasonable" answer.

So when you ask an AI something like the meaning of life, or whether Christianity is credible, you're not getting pure, neutral computation. You're getting an output shaped by two layers of human choice – what the internet happens to say most, and what a handful of engineers decided to reinforce.

That's not the same as truth.

To be fair, this isn't a purely negative thing. AI can also be a genuinely useful tool for checking facts and finding sources, if you use it that way. But it is one more reason to keep your critical thinking sharp, and to verify what you're told rather than accept it simply because it sounded confident and well-written.

Look at the actual sources. 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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