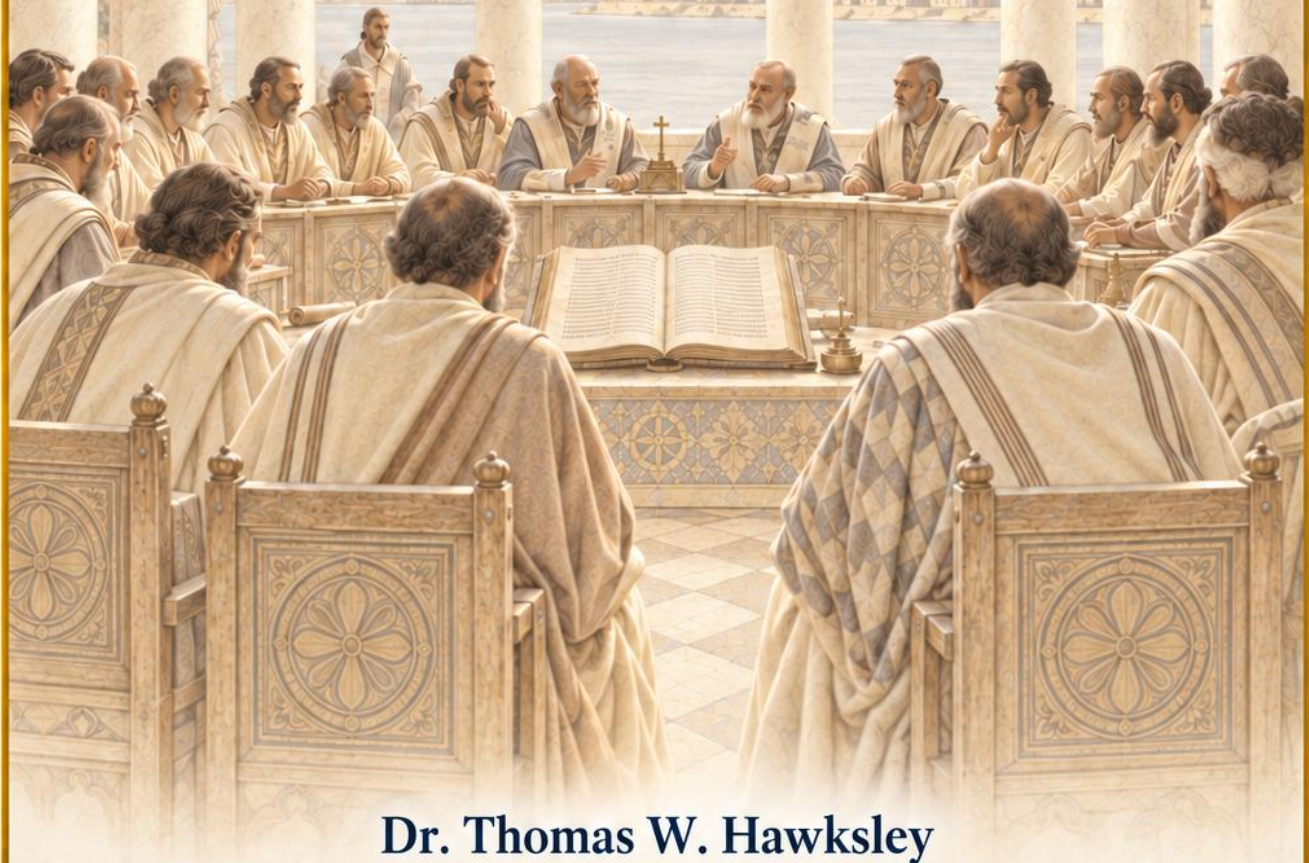


REASON TOGETHER CHURCH



The Council of Nicaea



Dr. Thomas W. Hawksley

REASON TOGETHER CHURCH

RTS-123

The Council of Nicaea

Sermon

Dr. Thomas W. Hawksley

Reason Together Church

Aloha.

Welcome to Reason Together Church.

Bring your questions.

Open your Bible.

Let us Reason Together the Word of God.

Today we are asking a question that many Christians have heard but few have taken time to investigate.

Did the Council of Nicaea choose the books of the Bible?

Did Emperor Constantine bring church leaders together and tell them which writings would become Scripture?

Did a room full of bishops vote Matthew, Mark, Luke and John into the Bible while voting other gospels out?

And if fallible human beings participated in identifying the books of the Bible, could they have made a mistake?

Could they have accepted something God did not inspire?

Could they have rejected something God intended His people to receive?

Those are not hostile questions.

They are responsible questions.

If God has spoken, we should want everything He gave us.

If God did not speak through a particular book, we should not place that book under His name.

Deuteronomy 4:2 says, "Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it."

Revelation 22 gives a solemn warning against adding to or taking away from the words of its prophecy.

So the boundaries of Scripture matter.

We are not beginning this study by assuming that every council was right.

We are not beginning by assuming that every council was wrong.

We are going to ask what happened.

We are going to ask what did not happen.

Then we are going to ask the deeper question that remains after the popular story has been corrected.

Imagine that every book of the New Testament has been placed before you as a separate handwritten document.

There is no leather cover.

There are no gold-edged pages.

There is no printed table of contents.

There are no chapter numbers or verse numbers.

The words "Holy Bible" are not stamped upon the front.

Matthew is one manuscript.

Romans is another.

Hebrews is another.

Revelation is another.

Nearby are copies of 1 Clement, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Didache and the Epistle of Barnabas.

Some of those writings are old.

Some are orthodox.

Some are spiritually profitable.

Some were read in Christian churches.

How would you know which writings were inspired by God?

The first question is not, "Who put the Bible together?"

The first question is, "What makes a writing the Word of God?"

A council cannot breathe God into a human book.

A bishop cannot make an uninspired sentence inspired by approving it.

An emperor cannot turn a later legend into apostolic testimony by financing enough copies.

Second Peter 1:21 says, "For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost."

Inspiration is God acting through chosen human writers so that they communicate what He intends them to communicate.

That inspiration gives Scripture its authority.

Recognition comes afterward.

Recognition does not create the authority.

Recognition acknowledges the authority that is already there.

A scientist does not create a star by discovering it.

A court does not create an event by examining the evidence that it happened.

A mother does not create the voice of her child by recognizing it in a crowded room.

The Council of Nicaea could not make a book Scripture.

The important question is whether the church correctly recognized the books God inspired.

Long before Nicaea, God gave His people written revelation.

Moses recorded the words of the covenant.

Exodus 24:4 says, "And Moses wrote all the words of the LORD."

At the end of Deuteronomy, Moses commanded that the book of the law be placed beside the ark of the covenant.

Joshua 24:26 says, "And Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God."

First Samuel 10:25 says that Samuel "told the people the manner of the kingdom, and wrote it in a book, and laid it up before the LORD."

The prophets were repeatedly instructed to write the word of the Lord.

Jeremiah 30:2 says, "Thus speaketh the LORD God of Israel, saying, Write thee all the words that I have spoken unto thee in a book."

Daniel later read the prophecies of Jeremiah and understood them as authoritative words concerning the captivity.

The collection of Scripture grew as God gave additional revelation.

That is important when we read Deuteronomy 4:2.

"Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it."

That verse cannot mean that God would never give another inspired word after Moses.

If that were its meaning, Joshua would be an addition.

The Psalms would be an addition.

Isaiah would be an addition.

The Gospels would be an addition.

The warning means that Israel must not alter the commandment God had given.

Do not place human words in God's mouth.

Do not remove what God requires.

Do not edit divine revelation until it agrees with human preference.

God may add further revelation when He chooses.

Man may not change what God has spoken.

By the time of Jesus, there was a recognized body of Jewish Scripture.

Luke 24:44 records the words of the risen Christ.

"These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me."

Jesus referred to the Law of Moses.

He referred to the Prophets.

He referred to the Psalms, the leading book in the section commonly called the Writings.

Jesus did not treat every Jewish religious writing as equal Scripture.

He spoke of an identifiable collection.

In John 10:35 He said, "The scripture cannot be broken."

Jesus received Scripture as the authoritative Word of God.

He quoted it in temptation.

He taught from it in the synagogue.

He corrected false interpretations of it.

He fulfilled what it promised.

He distinguished the commandments of God from the traditions of men.

Then Jesus authorized witnesses who would proclaim His life, death and resurrection.

In John 14:26 He told the apostles that the Holy Ghost would teach them and bring His words to their remembrance.

In John 16:13 He promised that the Spirit of truth would guide them into truth.

The apostles did not present themselves as religious commentators offering private opinions.

They understood themselves to be commissioned witnesses of Jesus Christ.

Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, "When ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God."

Paul expected his letters to be read in the churches.

First Thessalonians 5:27 says, "I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read unto all the holy brethren."

Colossians 4:16 instructed the Colossians to exchange letters with the church at Laodicea.

The writings were copied.

They were carried.

They were read aloud.

They were compared with the teaching already received.

They were preserved because Christians believed they carried apostolic authority.

The New Testament itself shows recognition beginning before the death of the apostles.

First Timothy 5:18 says, "For the scripture saith, Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn. And, The labourer is worthy of his reward."

The first statement comes from Deuteronomy.

The second corresponds to the words of Jesus recorded in Luke 10:7.

Both are introduced by the words, "the scripture saith."

Second Peter 3:15 and 16 speaks directly about the writings of Paul.

Peter says that Paul wrote according to the wisdom given unto him.

He says that some things in Paul's epistles are hard to understand.

Then he says that unstable people twist those writings "as they do also the other scriptures."

Peter placed Paul's writings alongside "the other scriptures."

The recognition of New Testament Scripture did not begin in AD 325.

It had begun during the apostolic period.

Now let us travel forward to Nicaea.

The Council of Nicaea met in AD 325 in the city of Nicaea, located in what is now Turkey.

The Roman emperor Constantine called the gathering.

Constantine's role matters, but it must be described accurately.

He did not invent Christianity.

He did not make Christianity the official religion of the empire at Nicaea.

The Edict of Milan in AD 313 had granted toleration after severe persecution.

Constantine wanted religious peace in an empire that had suffered political and spiritual division.

His motives included political unity, but an emperor's political interest does not prove that he authored the church's doctrine.

The bishops debated Arius by appealing to Scripture, worship and the faith they believed they had received.

Constantine did not sit before a pile of anonymous books and create a New Testament.

He did not order the council to discard inconvenient gospels.

He did not possess the historical power to erase every manuscript in churches spread across different languages and regions.

Several years after Nicaea, Constantine asked Eusebius to prepare fifty copies of the sacred Scriptures for churches in Constantinople.

That later commission is sometimes blended into the Nicaea story.

The surviving letter does not provide a table of contents.

It does not say that the council had just decided which books belonged in those copies.

An imperial request to produce Bibles is not evidence of an imperial invention of the Bible.

Several hundred bishops and church leaders attended.

Some of those men carried scars from the persecutions that had taken place under earlier emperors.

They did not gather primarily to discuss a table of contents.

They gathered because the church was divided over the teaching of a presbyter named Arius. Arius taught that the Son did not exist eternally in the same way as the Father. He treated the Son as the highest of created beings. According to the Arian claim, there had been a time when the Son was not. The issue concerned the identity of Jesus Christ. Is Jesus truly God? Is the Son eternal? Is He of the same divine nature as the Father? Or is He a glorious creature standing between God and the rest of creation? That was the central controversy. The council confessed that the Son is "of one substance" with the Father. The council did not make Jesus divine by taking a vote. The deity of Christ had been confessed, preached, worshiped and defended before Constantine was born. John had written, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Thomas had addressed the risen Christ as, "My Lord and my God." Paul had written that Christ was in the form of God and took upon Himself the form of a servant. The council attempted to use careful language to reject a teaching it believed contradicted the apostolic witness. Nicaea also addressed the observance of Easter and several matters of church discipline. It discussed clergy, ordination, jurisdiction and the restoration of those who had denied the faith under persecution. The council's surviving creed does not give a list of Biblical books. Its twenty surviving canons do not give a list of Biblical books. Contemporary accounts do not describe a vote in which the bishops selected the books of the Bible. There is no contemporary account of Constantine choosing Matthew, Mark, Luke and John over rival gospels. The word canon can cause confusion. Nicaea issued canons. In that context, a canon was a church rule or disciplinary decision. The canons issued by Nicaea were not a decision about the Biblical canon. So where did the popular story come from?

Centuries after Nicaea, a work commonly called the Synodicon Vetus told a dramatic story. According to that later account, competing books were placed near an altar. The council prayed. The inspired books supposedly remained above while the false books fell beneath. It is a memorable story. It is also far removed from the event it claims to describe. It does not appear in the contemporary records. Voltaire later repeated the story with ridicule. Modern novels and internet claims gave the legend new life. Repeating a story does not make it early. Making a story dramatic does not make it true. Correcting the Nicaea legend does not answer every question about the canon. It does something necessary first. It removes a false premise so that we can investigate the real history. The real history shows that Christians were recognizing and using New Testament writings long before AD 325. Around the end of the second century, Irenaeus strongly defended four Gospels. He named Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. He did so roughly a century and a half before Nicaea. He did not speak as though those four books had just entered a contest. He spoke of them as the received Gospel witness of the churches. An early document called the Muratorian Fragment also lists most of the books in our New Testament. The beginning of the surviving document is damaged. Its contents raise questions of their own. Nevertheless, it proves that Christians were listing, receiving and distinguishing authoritative writings well before Constantine. Early Christian manuscripts contain collections of the Gospels. Others contain collections of Paul's letters. Christians quoted New Testament books in sermons, letters and defenses of the faith. They did not wait for Nicaea to begin calling apostolic writings Scripture. That does not mean every congregation possessed every book. Books had to be copied by hand.

A congregation in one region might know a writing long before a congregation in another region received a copy.

A short personal letter would not circulate as quickly as a Gospel used every week in public worship.

Communication was slow.

Travel could be dangerous.

Persecution destroyed property and scattered churches.

Yet a recognizable center emerged early.

The four Gospels were central.

Acts was central.

Paul's major letters were central.

Several other apostolic writings were broadly received.

There were questions at the edges.

We should not hide those questions.

Hebrews was questioned in portions of the West because its author is not named.

James had limited early circulation in some regions.

Second Peter was questioned because its external evidence was thinner and its style differs from 1 Peter.

Second and Third John are brief and identify their writer as "the elder."

Jude includes material associated with Jewish writings outside the Protestant canon.

Revelation was accepted strongly in many places but questioned in parts of the East, partly because speculative groups misused it.

Look closely at what those disagreements mean.

Hebrews was not questioned because it taught a different Christ.

Its majestic teaching about the Son agreed with the apostolic faith.

The question concerned the identity of its human writer and the strength of its circulation in particular regions.

Second Peter was not rejected by a council at Nicaea and restored by another council later.

It was carefully examined over time because churches wanted to know whether its claim to Petrine authority was genuine.

Revelation did not become Scripture because later bishops enjoyed its visions.

Many early Christians received it as the work of John, while others hesitated because its symbolism had been abused.

These examples show why the process took time at the edges.

The church was not deciding whether it liked the message.

It was asking whether a writing truly came from the apostolic foundation, agreed with the rule of faith and had been received among the churches.

That discernment could be imperfect because people are imperfect.

Yet disagreement itself is not evidence of corruption.

Sometimes disagreement is evidence that people refused to place a doubtful claim beside Isaiah, John or Romans without careful examination.

The long discussion also made the evidence visible.

Questions about authorship, usage and doctrine were not hidden behind an emperor's decree.

They were preserved in the writings of Origen, Eusebius, Athanasius and others so that later generations could study them.

Eusebius, writing near the time of Nicaea, did not pretend that these questions did not exist.

He described books that were acknowledged.

He described books that were disputed but known to many.

He described writings considered spurious.

He also described books he regarded as heretical.

That record proves that there was disagreement.

It also proves that early Christians were not accepting every ancient religious book without examination.

The honest historical picture is broad agreement at the center with genuine questions at the edges.

It is not universal uncertainty.

It is not effortless unanimity.

It is a process of reception, testing and communication.

The church also possessed other respected Christian writings.

First Clement was an early letter from the church at Rome to the church at Corinth.

It contains valuable instruction concerning order, humility and peace.

The Didache preserves early Christian teaching about conduct, baptism, fasting, prayer and church life.

The Shepherd of Hermas was popular and spiritually influential.

The Epistle of Barnabas was read in some communities.

Some ancient manuscript collections placed works such as Barnabas, Hermas or Clement after New Testament writings.

That physical placement matters as historical evidence.

It does not settle their canonical status.

We place study notes, maps, creeds and historical documents inside modern Bibles.

Their physical presence does not make them inspired.

Ancient book production did not always display categories as clearly as modern publishing does.

So we must ask how a writing was described, how broadly it was received and what authority was attributed to it.

Some respected Christian writings were probably written after the apostolic generation.

Some lacked a credible apostolic source.

Some were used for instruction but not for establishing doctrine.

Some never received broad acceptance across the churches.

There were also later writings that carried the names of apostles without being written by those apostles.

The Gospel of Thomas is not simply another first-century biography of Jesus that Constantine disliked.

It is a collection of sayings whose date, theology and relationship to the apostolic witness must be examined.

The Gospel of Judas did not almost become the fifth Gospel.

The Gospel of Peter was questioned because of its authorship and teaching.

A famous name on a manuscript did not guarantee acceptance.

Early Christians knew that false attribution was possible.

They rejected writings that claimed more authority than their history could support.

How, then, did Christians recognize canonical books?

They considered apostolic origin or connection.

Was the writing produced by an apostle?

Was it produced by a close associate of apostolic eyewitnesses?

Matthew and John were connected directly with the apostolic company.

Mark was associated with Peter.

Luke tells us that he investigated the testimony handed down by eyewitnesses, and Acts shows his association with Paul.

Paul wrote with recognized apostolic authority.

James and Jude were connected with Jesus and with the leadership of the earliest church.

The churches considered antiquity.

Did the writing come from the apostolic age?

A book written generations later might accurately explain apostolic doctrine.

It could not become part of the original apostolic foundation.

Ephesians 2:20 says that the household of God is "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone."

A foundation is laid at the beginning.

The churches considered doctrinal agreement.

Did the book agree with what the churches had received concerning God, Christ, salvation and holiness?

That did not mean that a church could reject a book whenever its teaching was uncomfortable.

It meant that a writing denying the God proclaimed by the prophets or the Christ proclaimed by the apostles could not credibly come from those same witnesses.

Orthodoxy alone was not enough.

A faithful sermon can be orthodox.

A sound commentary can be orthodox.

A hymn can be orthodox.

None becomes Scripture merely because it contains no error we can identify.

The churches considered widespread reception.

Was the writing known only within one movement or one town?

Or was it received among churches separated by geography, language and leadership?

The churches considered consistent use in worship and teaching.

Was the writing repeatedly read as authoritative Scripture?

They also recognized divine qualities in the books.

They heard a unified witness to the God of Israel and the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

They encountered words that exposed sin, revealed Christ and summoned the conscience before God.

That was not a mechanical points system.

No surviving universal checklist awarded a book so many points for age and so many points for usage.

Recognition developed through reading, teaching, worship, comparison, historical memory and communication among churches.

Now we reach the question we cannot avoid.

Could fallible Christians have been wrong?

Individual Christians could be wrong.

Individual bishops could be wrong.

Regional churches could be wrong.

The disagreements in the historical record prove that recognition was not automatic.

But the possibility of error does not prove that the final recognition was erroneous.

A fallible witness can tell the truth.

A fallible jury can reach a correct verdict.

A fallible historian can identify a genuine document.

We should not say, "Human beings were involved, therefore the result must be unreliable."

If that principle were applied consistently, we could trust no historical knowledge at all.

We should also refuse the opposite shortcut.

We should not say, "Church leaders were involved, therefore every decision they made was incapable of error."

The New Testament canon did not depend upon one emperor.

It did not depend upon one bishop.

It did not depend upon one city.

It did not depend upon one meeting.

It did not depend upon one generation.

The same central books were received among churches spread across the ancient world.

Those churches did not always agree about other matters.

They spoke different languages.

They lived under different local authorities.

They inherited the writings through different chains of transmission.

Their broad convergence matters.

The books exercised authority before the councils issued formal lists.

Christians preached from them.

They taught new believers from them.

They copied them at considerable expense.

They carried them through persecution.

They corrected doctrine by them.

They died confessing the Christ revealed in them.

In AD 367, Athanasius issued a Festal Letter that contains the earliest surviving list naming precisely the 27 books in our present New Testament.

He did not claim that he had just made them Scripture.

He described books handed down and received.

Regional councils at Hippo and Carthage later listed books approved for reading as divine Scripture.

Those councils were after Nicaea.

They were regional rather than the event in which Constantine supposedly created a Bible.

They recorded a developing and increasingly broad consensus.

At this point Christian theology speaks of providence.

The God who inspired His Word was not absent while His people received it.

Providence does not mean that nobody ever questioned a book.

Providence does not mean that every church father expressed the matter perfectly.

Providence means that human limitations did not defeat God's purpose.

God ordinarily works through human actions without making every human actor infallible.

He used parents to teach children.

He used scribes to copy manuscripts.

He used travelers to carry letters.

He used pastors to read them aloud.

He used churches to preserve them.

He used questions to force careful examination.

Historical evidence cannot place inspiration under a microscope.

It can show that the canon was not the product of a late political conspiracy.

It can show early use, apostolic connections, broad reception and careful distinction.

Faith then recognizes the providence of God operating through that history.

Now we must briefly distinguish the New Testament question from the question of the Old Testament Apocrypha.

Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant Christians receive the same 27-book New Testament.

Their principal canonical disagreement concerns the Old Testament.

Catholics receive books commonly called deuterocanonical.

Protestants commonly call those writings the Apocrypha.

They include Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Sirach, Baruch, 1 and 2 Maccabees and additions to Esther and Daniel.

Orthodox traditions may receive additional writings.

The Ethiopian Orthodox tradition includes 1 Enoch.

The Catholic argument emphasizes early Christian use, the Septuagint and the lists affirmed by councils such as Hippo and Carthage.

The Protestant argument emphasizes the Hebrew collection, distinctions made by early Christian writers and the difference between ecclesiastical reading and canonical authority.

The Orthodox approach emphasizes the Greek Scriptures and the continuing liturgical reception of the church.

That history is too important to reduce to a slogan.

The original 1611 King James Bible included an Apocrypha section between the Old and New Testaments.

That fact should not be denied.

It should also not be misrepresented.

The Church of England's Article VI distinguished the canonical books from other books read for examples of life and instruction but not used to establish doctrine.

Therefore, it is true that the original KJV printed the Apocrypha.

It is misleading to claim that its translators treated all eighty printed books as possessing identical canonical authority.

Later Protestant publishers commonly omitted the separate section.

Catholics and Orthodox Christians disagree with the Protestant classification, and their arguments deserve to be heard accurately.

Jude's use of Enoch illustrates another necessary distinction.

Jude 14 says, "And Enoch also, the seventh from Adam, prophesied of these."

The language corresponds to material in 1 Enoch.

That proves the material was known and useful to Jude.

It does not by itself prove that Jude canonized every part of the Book of Enoch.

Paul quoted Greek poets in Acts 17, 1 Corinthians 15 and Titus 1.

A true statement may be quoted from a source without every sentence in that source becoming Scripture.

Physical inclusion is not the same as canonical equality.

Liturgical reading is not always the same as authority for doctrine.

Quotation is not always canonization.

Usefulness is not always inspiration.

These distinctions do not settle every disputed book.

They allow us to investigate the evidence without confusing categories.

We now return to the warnings that made our question serious.

Proverbs 30:5 and 6 says, "Every word of God is pure: he is a shield unto them that put their trust in him. Add thou not unto his words, lest he reprove thee, and thou be found a liar."

God condemns the person who puts words in His mouth.

Revelation 22:18 says, "If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book."

Verse 19 warns against taking away "from the words of the book of this prophecy."

The immediate reference is Revelation.

John was writing a particular prophecy to particular churches.

The 66-book Bible had not yet been printed as one volume with Revelation on its final pages.

Revelation 22 is not an inspired table of contents.

It does establish the holiness of what God revealed through John.

The same moral principle applies to every word genuinely given by God.

If God inspired a book, we have no authority to reject it.

If God did not inspire a book, we have no authority to place it under His name.

If God gave a command, we must not remove it because it confronts us.

If God did not give a command, we must not bind another person's conscience with it.

The warnings should humble every side of the discussion.

The Protestant must not dismiss a book merely because it is unfamiliar.

The Catholic must not assume that a regional council automatically ends every historical question for those who do not share the Catholic doctrine of church authority.

The skeptic must not repeat the Nicaea legend after the evidence has corrected it.

The Christian must not defend truth with a false story.

Acts 17:11 commends the Bereans because "they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so."

We should bring that same seriousness to claims about church history.

When someone says Nicaea chose the Bible, ask for the contemporary record.

When someone says a book was removed, ask when, by whom and from which recognized collection.

When someone points to a quotation, ask whether the writer identified the source as Scripture.

When someone points to a manuscript, ask whether physical inclusion necessarily established equal authority.

When someone says, "The church decided," ask which church, which date, which region and what kind of decision was made.

Questions are not the enemy of faith.

Carelessness is an enemy of truth.

There is also a personal danger hidden inside this historical discussion.

Some people will debate the table of contents of the Bible without reading the books named in it.

They will defend inspiration but resist correction.

They will argue that no one may remove a verse while removing that verse's authority from their decisions.

They will insist that every word is true while refusing to forgive, refusing to repent or refusing to surrender a cherished sin.

The greatest danger may not be that someone at Nicaea removed a book from the Bible.

The greatest danger may be that we possess the Bible God preserved and remove its authority from our lives.

We may never tear a page from its binding.

Yet we subtract from its rule when we say, "I know what God said, but I will not obey."

We subtract from its rule when we accept its promises but reject its correction.

We subtract from its rule when we want Christ as Savior but refuse Him as Lord.

The proper response to trustworthy Scripture is to read it.

Study it.

Test what you are told about it.

Believe what it teaches.

Obey what God commands.

Allow it to expose the thoughts and intentions of your heart.

Second Timothy 3:15 tells us why the Scriptures were given.

Paul reminded Timothy that he had known the holy Scriptures from childhood.

Those Scriptures "are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus."

The purpose of Scripture is greater than winning an argument about ancient books.

The Scriptures reveal Jesus Christ.

They tell us that God created us.

They tell us that we have sinned against Him.

They tell us that the wages of sin is death.

They tell us that the eternal Son of God took upon Himself true humanity.

They tell us that Jesus lived without sin.

They tell us that He died for our sins according to the Scriptures.

They tell us that He was buried.

They tell us that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.

They tell us that forgiveness cannot be purchased by our works.

They tell us that salvation is the gift of God received through faith in Jesus Christ.

No council can save us.

No knowledge of church history can save us.

Owning the correct collection of books cannot save us.

The Scriptures direct us to the One who saves.

If you have never trusted Jesus Christ, the question before you is not whether you can explain Athanasius or Eusebius.

The question is what you will do with Jesus.

Do you acknowledge that you have sinned?

Do you believe that Christ died for your sins and rose again?

Will you stop trusting your goodness, your religion or your knowledge and trust Him?

Romans 10:13 says, "For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved."

You may call upon Him today.

You do not need perfect knowledge before you come.

You need the honesty to confess your need and the faith to receive the Savior whom Scripture proclaims.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, thank You for speaking to us.

Thank You for the prophets and apostles through whom You gave Your Word.

Thank You for the believers who copied it, carried it, translated it and taught it.

Forgive us when we repeat claims without examining whether they are true.

Forgive us when we defend the authority of Scripture with our mouths but resist it in our lives.

Give us wisdom to distinguish Your Word from human tradition.

Give us humility when the history is more complicated than our slogans.

Give us confidence that human weakness cannot defeat Your purpose.

For anyone who has never trusted Jesus Christ, open that heart to the truth of the Gospel.

May that person turn from sin and call upon the Lord today.

Teach all of us to receive Your Word, believe Your Word and obey Your Word.

We pray in the name of Jesus.

Amen.

As we close, do not leave with only one corrected fact about an ancient council.

Leave with renewed gratitude for the Word placed in your hands.

The Bible was copied because Christians believed its message mattered.

It was carried across borders because they believed its message mattered.

It was translated because they believed its message mattered.

Some believers lost property, freedom and life while confessing the Christ revealed in its pages.

We possess what generations labored to preserve.

Let us not place it unopened upon a shelf.

Let us not defend it in public while rejecting it in private.

Let us search it carefully.

Let us test what we are told.

Let us believe what God has spoken.

Let us follow the Christ whom Scripture reveals.

Aloha Nui Loa.

REASON TOGETHER CHURCH

The Council of Nicaea

Commentary

Dr. Thomas W. Hawksley

Reason Together Church

Introduction

This commentary examines the Biblical passages most often used in discussions of the canon and places them beside the historical claims surrounding the Council of Nicaea. No passage says that Nicaea chose the Bible. The Biblical case must instead be developed from the nature of inspiration, the authority of prophetic and apostolic witnesses, the recognition of writings within Scripture and the warnings against altering God's revelation.

The commentary distinguishes exegesis from later application. Deuteronomy 4:2 directly addresses Israel's covenant obligation. Revelation 22:18–19 directly protects the Apocalypse of John. These passages provide a genuine principle against tampering with revelation, but neither supplies a table of contents.

Deuteronomy 4 1 to 2

Literary Setting

Deuteronomy presents Moses addressing Israel before entry into Canaan. Chapter 4 calls the nation to hear and obey the statutes and judgments God gave. Obedience would display wisdom before the nations and preserve Israel's covenant life in the land.

Verse 2 reads, "Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you."

The verse concerns the word commanded through Moses. Adding and diminishing are ways of replacing obedience with human control. An addition can distort a command as effectively as a deletion. A person may make obedience more burdensome by adding human demands or make it easier by removing what God requires.

Canonical Application

The command cannot mean that no divinely authorized revelation would follow Deuteronomy. Joshua, the historical books, wisdom writings, prophets and New Testament came later. Deuteronomy itself anticipates future prophetic speech in chapter 18.

The distinction is between God giving further revelation and human beings altering revelation without authority. The passage therefore supports the seriousness of the canon question but does not settle which later books belong in the canon.

Preaching Emphasis

The warning reaches beyond physical editing. A preacher adds to God's Word when he binds consciences where God has not spoken. A hearer subtracts in practice when he knowingly refuses a command. The sermon should apply the passage personally without confusing application with its original covenant setting.

Deuteronomy 12 32

Deuteronomy 12 regulates Israel's worship as the nation prepares to enter a land filled with idolatrous practices. Verse 32 says, "What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it."

The immediate concern is worship according to divine command rather than imitation of surrounding nations. Addition is not harmless creativity when it changes obedience. Subtraction is not freedom when it removes what God required.

In canonical discussion, this verse reinforces the principle that humans do not possess authority to redesign revelation. It does not close the canon at Deuteronomy.

Proverbs 30 5 to 6

The sayings of Agur begin with humility about human knowledge. Against human limitation stands the purity of God's speech: "Every word of God is pure: he is a shield unto them that put their trust in him."

Verse 6 continues, "Add thou not unto his words, lest he reprove thee, and thou be found a liar."

The language connects adding to God's words with lying. The offender does not merely make a technical mistake. He attributes to God something God did not say. The passage therefore speaks directly to false prophecy, false teaching and every attempt to secure divine authority for human opinion.

In the canon question, Proverbs 30 guards both directions. Calling an uninspired writing Scripture falsely places words under God's name. Rejecting inspired revelation refuses words whose purity God guarantees. The verse states the obligation but does not identify each canonical book.

Luke 11 49 to 51 and Matthew 23 34 to 35

Jesus condemns a generation that inherits and repeats the rejection of God's messengers. Luke speaks of the blood of the prophets from Abel to Zacharias. Matthew identifies the latter as Zacharias son of Barachias, creating an identification question because 2 Chronicles 24 describes Zechariah son of Jehoiada being killed in the temple court.

Many Protestant canon arguments understand "Abel to Zechariah" as a canonical sweep from Genesis to Chronicles in Hebrew order. Abel's death occurs in Genesis 4. Zechariah son of Jehoiada dies in 2 Chronicles 24, near the end of the final book in the traditional Hebrew arrangement.

This interpretation is plausible and rhetorically powerful, but the patronymic in Matthew requires caution. Proposed explanations include textual or naming complications, confusion with another Zechariah or reference to an otherwise unknown event. The passage contributes to discussion of Jesus' scriptural framework, but Luke 24:44 and Josephus provide clearer evidence for the collection's shape.

Luke 24 44 to 45

The risen Jesus says, "All things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me."

The verse identifies three bodies of writing. The Law of Moses is the Torah. The Prophets reflects the prophetic division. Psalms probably represents the Writings because Psalms is its most prominent book. The exact ordering of the Writings varied, so the phrase should not be forced into a later standardized table of contents without qualification.

Verse 45 adds, "Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures." Jesus treats these writings as a unified witness to His suffering, resurrection and worldwide proclamation.

The passage establishes several points relevant to canon. Jesus recognized authoritative Scripture. He understood its diverse sections as telling one redemptive story. He stood as the fulfillment and interpretive center of that story.

The passage does not name every Old Testament book. It gives strong evidence for the Law, Prophets and Writings framework within which the Old Testament canon developed.

John 10 34 to 36

Jesus responds to the accusation of blasphemy by citing Psalm 82:6. His parenthetical statement is decisive: "the scripture cannot be broken."

The Greek verb translated broken carries the sense of being annulled, loosened or set aside. Jesus treats the scriptural wording as binding within His argument. His reasoning turns on the use of "gods" for human judges or representatives in the Psalm and proceeds from the lesser case to His consecration and sending by the Father.

For this study, the passage establishes Christ's view of scriptural authority. It does not provide a list. The authority belongs to Scripture because it is the Word of God, not because Jesus appeals to a later council.

John 14 25 to 26 and John 16 12 to 15

In the Farewell Discourse, Jesus prepares His disciples for His departure. John 14:26 promises that the Comforter will teach them and bring Christ's words to remembrance. John 16:13 promises that the Spirit of truth will guide them into all truth and declare what is to come.

These promises first concern the apostolic witnesses in the upper-room setting. They should not be flattened into a promise that every Christian memory, sermon or council decision is infallible. The apostles occupied a foundational role as witnesses commissioned by Christ.

The passages support the theological basis for the Gospel witness. The church receives the apostolic testimony because Christ authorized the witnesses and promised the Spirit's work in their testimony.

John 20 30 to 31

John acknowledges selection. Jesus performed many signs not written in this book. The written signs were chosen "that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name."

Not every true event or apostolic memory was written into Scripture. Canonicity is therefore not equivalent to containing all possible historical information. The Gospel is a purposeful, sufficient witness leading to faith in Christ.

This passage also challenges the idea that later gospels must be accepted merely because they claim to supply missing episodes. John openly admits selectivity and states the theological purpose of his selection.

Acts 2 42

The first Jerusalem believers "continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers."

The apostles' doctrine existed orally before the New Testament collection was complete. Christianity was never founded upon detached documents without living witnesses. At the same time, the later written apostolic witness preserves and normatively communicates that foundational teaching.

Catholic and Orthodox interpreters emphasize the church's reception of apostolic tradition. Protestants emphasize that the inspired apostolic writings now provide the normative standard by which traditions are tested. The verse establishes the authority of apostolic teaching but does not by itself resolve the later relationship of Scripture and tradition.

Acts 15 1 to 29

The Jerusalem council is sometimes invoked as a model of infallible conciliar authority. The dispute concerned whether Gentile converts must be circumcised and keep the law of Moses. Apostles and elders met, heard testimony, appealed to God's work and interpreted Amos. Their letter says, "For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us."

The event shows that the early church resolved a major dispute corporately under apostolic leadership. It does not describe the Council of Nicaea and does not establish that every later council would be protected from every error. The continuing presence of apostles makes Acts 15 unique even while it supplies principles of deliberation, testimony, Scripture and unity.

Acts 17 10 to 12

The Bereans received Paul's word with readiness and searched the Scriptures daily to determine whether these things were so. Their examination was not condemned as rebellion against apostolic authority. Honest testing and receptive hearing belonged together.

The passage encourages Christians to test claims about Nicaea and the canon. Searching must use relevant evidence. The Bereans had an existing scriptural standard and were evaluating Paul's proclamation of its fulfillment in Christ.

Acts 17 28

Paul tells the Athenians, "For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring."

The exact poetic sources are discussed, but the canonical point is straightforward. Paul can quote a true line from a non-Biblical poet without making the poet's entire work Scripture. Inspiration governs Paul's use of the material in Acts. It does not retroactively inspire the source.

This provides an analogy for Jude's use of Enoch, though the introductory language in Jude is stronger and must receive separate attention.

First Corinthians 2 12 to 13

Paul contrasts the spirit of the world with the Spirit of God. The apostles speak what the Spirit teaches, "comparing spiritual things with spiritual." The passage supports the divine source of apostolic proclamation.

Interpretive debates surround the final phrase, which may mean interpreting spiritual truths to spiritual people or combining spiritual truths with Spirit-taught words. Either way, Paul grounds apostolic communication in the Spirit rather than human wisdom.

First Corinthians 14 37

Paul writes, "If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord."

The verse gives written apostolic instruction binding authority. It also supplies a test for claimed spirituality. The Spirit does not lead a person to reject the command communicated by Christ's authorized apostle.

First Corinthians 15 33

Paul says, "Evil communications corrupt good manners." The line appears in Greek comedy, commonly associated with Menander. Its canonical use demonstrates again that citation does not canonize a source. Paul employs a true and memorable statement within an inspired argument about resurrection and conduct.

Colossians 4 16

Paul commands that the Colossian letter be read in Laodicea and that the Colossians read the letter from Laodicea. The verse documents early circulation and exchange of apostolic correspondence.

The identity of the Laodicean letter is uncertain. It may be a lost letter, a letter now known under another destination such as Ephesians or a letter traveling through Laodicea. The possibility of a

lost Pauline letter does not mean a canonical book disappeared. Not every apostolic communication was necessarily inspired for permanent canonical preservation. Canonicity must not be equated mechanically with authorship by an apostle.

First Thessalonians 2 13

Paul thanks God that the Thessalonians received the preached message "not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God."

The verse concerns apostolic proclamation. It demonstrates that divine authority could operate through authorized human speech before the final New Testament collection. The written letters preserve that authoritative apostolic ministry.

First Thessalonians 5 27

Paul solemnly charges that the epistle be read to all the holy brethren. Public reading places the letter in the worship and instruction of the church. The command helps explain how letters addressed to local situations became known beyond their first recipients.

Second Thessalonians 2 15

Paul commands believers to hold the traditions taught "whether by word, or our epistle." Apostolic teaching came orally and in writing.

Catholic and Orthodox theology cites this verse against the claim that the apostles transmitted authority only in written form. Protestants respond that the issue is not whether authoritative oral teaching existed but whether its contents remain identifiably and infallibly preserved outside Scripture after the apostles' deaths.

The verse should be allowed to establish what it says. Both oral and written apostolic instruction bound the Thessalonians. It does not name every later tradition or settle its historical transmission.

Second Thessalonians 3 14

Paul expects the church to mark anyone who refuses "our word by this epistle." Written apostolic instruction carried disciplinary authority. The verse supports the movement from apostolic mission to a body of writings governing churches.

First Timothy 5 18

Paul says, "For the scripture saith, Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn. And, The labourer is worthy of his reward."

The first quotation is Deuteronomy 25:4. The second closely matches Luke 10:7. If Paul quotes Luke, this is early recognition of Gospel material as Scripture. Alternatives include Paul's use of an oral saying of Jesus or a shared tradition later written in Luke.

The singular introductory formula can govern both statements. The passage therefore provides important evidence, though the conclusion should acknowledge the literary question rather than present it as undisputed proof of a completed Gospel canon.

Second Timothy 3 14 to 17

Timothy knew the holy Scriptures from childhood. In the immediate historical setting, these writings are the Jewish Scriptures taught by his mother and grandmother. They were able to make him wise unto salvation through faith in Christ because the Old Testament points toward the Gospel.

Verse 16 says, "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness."

The Greek term translated "given by inspiration of God" means God-breathed. The verse identifies the source and usefulness of Scripture. It does not say that a council's acceptance causes inspiration.

The phrase "all scripture" may be rendered every Scripture or all Scripture. In context it affirms the God-breathed character of the sacred writings. The church later and properly applies the same truth to the apostolic writings recognized as Scripture.

Verses 16 and 17 describe sufficiency for the man of God to be complete and equipped for every good work. The passage is central to Protestant doctrines of Scripture. Catholic and Orthodox readers affirm inspiration and usefulness while disputing whether the verse teaches Scripture as the sole infallible rule apart from authoritative tradition.

For preaching, verse 15 supplies the destination of canonical confidence. Scripture makes a person wise unto salvation through faith in Christ. The goal is not merely a correct list but saving knowledge and obedient life.

Hebrews 1 1 to 2

Hebrews presents continuity and climax. God spoke at various times and in various ways through the prophets. In these last days He has spoken in His Son.

The Son is not merely one more prophet added to a sequence. He is the heir of all things and the One through whom God made the worlds. The apostolic witness to the Son therefore belongs to the climactic stage of revelation.

The passage supports the theological logic of a New Testament. The Old Testament anticipates Christ. The Gospel and apostolic writings bear authoritative witness to the final revelation in the Son.

Second Peter 1 16 to 21

Peter denies that the apostolic message rests upon "cunningly devised fables." He appeals to eyewitness experience of the transfiguration and to the prophetic word.

Verses 20 and 21 teach that prophecy did not originate in private human interpretation or human will. "Holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost."

The verb translated moved describes being borne or carried. Human authors truly spoke, but the ultimate source and direction came from the Holy Ghost. This is a principal Biblical basis for the doctrine that authority arises from divine inspiration.

The passage does not explain the later historical process of collecting books. It tells the church what sort of speech it seeks to recognize.

Second Peter 3 15 to 16

Peter refers to "our beloved brother Paul" and to "all his epistles." This language suggests a known Pauline collection. He acknowledges that some statements are hard to understand and that unlearned and unstable people twist them.

The phrase "as they do also the other scriptures" is central. The most natural reading places Paul's epistles within a wider category of Scripture. The passage is evidence that canonical recognition began within the early Christian period rather than with a fourth-century council.

Questions concerning the authorship and date of 2 Peter affect how the evidence is dated. Traditional authorship places recognition within Peter's lifetime. A later date still places the text before Nicaea and reflects early reception of Paul as Scripture.

The pastoral point should not be missed. Difficulty in Scripture does not excuse distortion. Some passages are hard, yet the reader remains responsible to handle them faithfully.

Jude 3

Jude urges believers to contend for "the faith which was once delivered unto the saints." The faith is a received body of apostolic truth, not an endlessly revised message.

The verse concerns the substance of Christian confession rather than a completed table of contents. It nevertheless supports the idea that the church recognizes and guards a deposit already given.

Jude 9

Jude refers to Michael disputing with the devil over the body of Moses. The episode is not narrated in the Protestant Old Testament. Early writers associated it with the Assumption or Testament of Moses, though the surviving textual situation is incomplete.

Jude's use shows that material outside the canonical Old Testament could be employed authoritatively within an inspired letter. It does not follow that every part of the source possessed canonical status.

Jude 14 to 15

Jude says, "And Enoch also, the seventh from Adam, prophesied of these." The following judgment oracle corresponds closely to 1 Enoch 1:9.

The description "seventh from Adam" also appears in 1 Enoch. Jude does more than use a casual proverb. He attributes prophecy to Enoch and applies the oracle to the false teachers.

Several conclusions must be distinguished.

First, Jude knew an Enochic tradition and considered the quoted prophecy true and applicable.

Second, because Jude is Scripture, Jude's use of the words is inspired within its present context.

Third, quotation of a passage does not logically establish the inspiration of every section in the source collection.

Fourth, Ethiopian Christian reception of 1 Enoch shows that the canonical question is not merely theoretical. Different Christian traditions have reached different conclusions.

The passage should therefore be treated neither as irrelevant nor as automatic proof of whole-book canonicity.

Revelation 1 3 and 1 11

Revelation begins with a blessing upon the person who reads and those who hear "the words of this prophecy." The singular reader likely reflects public reading in the churches. Verse 11 commands John to write in a book and send it to seven churches.

Revelation presents itself as prophetic writing intended for corporate reception. Its authority claim exists within the book before later councils discuss its status.

Revelation 22 18 to 19

John testifies "unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book." Adding brings the plagues written in the book. Taking away brings loss from the blessings described in it.

"This book" most directly refers to Revelation. Similar protective warnings appear in ancient covenantal and legal contexts. The placement of Revelation at the end of the modern Bible gives the warning a broader visual effect, but that later placement should not replace exegesis.

The warning was not originally a statement that no inspired writing could exist after Revelation based merely on its later canonical order. Arguments for the closure of revelation should instead consider the completed apostolic foundation, the once-delivered faith and the climactic revelation in Christ.

The principle legitimately extends to all Scripture. Once a writing is recognized as God-breathed, no person may alter its message or deny its authority.

First Corinthians 4 6

Paul warns the Corinthians not to think of men "above that which is written." The exact force of the phrase is debated. It may refer to scriptural quotations Paul has used, a familiar rule or another written standard.

The verse supports humility under a received norm but should not be used as a simple proof text for a completed New Testament canon or the later formula of Scripture alone.

Galatians 1 8 to 9

Paul declares that even an apostle or angel preaching another gospel is accursed. The received Gospel judges the messenger. Authority does not belong to office, spiritual appearance or later claim when the message contradicts apostolic revelation.

This principle helps explain the rejection of later writings that bore apostolic names but proclaimed a different God, Christ or salvation.

First John 4 1 to 6

John commands believers to test the spirits because false prophets have gone into the world. The test includes confession of Jesus Christ come in the flesh and reception of the apostolic witness: "He that knoweth God heareth us."

Doctrinal coherence and apostolic reception belong together. The passage supplies a Biblical basis for rejecting writings that deny the incarnation or contradict authorized witnesses.

Canon Recognition and Church Authority

The Biblical passages establish inspiration, prophetic authority, apostolic authority, recognition of writings and the obligation to test claims. They do not narrate the entire later process or name a fourth-century institution that would produce an infallible table of contents.

Protestant theology concludes that the church receives a canon whose authority comes from God. Councils may testify truly without becoming infallible. Confidence rests in providence, apostolic evidence, the qualities of Scripture and broad reception.

Catholic theology concludes that the same Spirit who inspired Scripture protects the church in definitively identifying the canon. The canon therefore cannot be separated from the teaching authority of the church.

Orthodox theology commonly emphasizes the Spirit-led life, worship and reception of the church. The canon is embedded in tradition rather than established by an isolated individual judgment.

The study should state its Protestant conclusion clearly while representing the other models accurately. The historical correction about Nicaea is shared across these traditions.

Pastoral Synthesis

The congregation should understand that the Council of Nicaea addressed the identity of Christ and did not issue the Bible's table of contents. The New Testament books were already functioning in Christian teaching and worship. Questions about several books continued after Nicaea, which itself disproves the claim that the council closed the matter.

The canon's history calls for confidence with humility. Confidence arises from early apostolic connection, widespread use, careful distinction and providential preservation. Humility arises because the process involved human limitations, regional differences and evidence that must be weighed rather than simplified.

Second Timothy 3:15 supplies the final emphasis. Scripture leads to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. A correct doctrine of canon should produce trust in Christ, submission to Scripture and honesty in the defense of truth.

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