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AUTHOR'S NOTE
THE PUZZLE OF JESUS

Who do you say that I am?"

The disciples knew what others were saying about Jesus. Some thought that he was John the Baptist or one of the prophets—but Jesus wanted a personal response: “Who do *you* say that I am?”

Jesus pressed for their answer, not about what he was saying or doing; he did not ask whether the disciples liked him or not. His question went to the heart of who he was as a person. Was he just an extraordinary man, or was he something more?

Even today the question still haunts us.

The controversy that surrounded the release of the movie *The Passion of The Christ* proved that this question still cries

for an answer. Justin Pope, in a recent *Chicago Sun Times* article, says that Jesus is a distant symbol with many interpretations. “There’s black Jesus, and white Jesus. Homely and handsome, capitalist and socialist, stern and hippie. Hard-working social reformer, mystical comforter.”¹

The Da Vinci Code offers a different answer: Jesus the married man; Jesus the feminist; Jesus the mortal prophet. It’s clear that everyone has an opinion about Jesus.

In this book, we’ll investigate the historical roots of early Christianity. We’ll seek to give credible answers to these questions: Who is Jesus? Are the documents of the New Testament reliable accounts of his life and ministry? And what should this mean to us who live in the twenty-first century?

We’ll take a look at how dissenters of the early centuries offered their own radical interpretation of the life and mission of Jesus. These dissenters had their own documents, their own religious convictions, and their own teachers. In this study, we will evaluate what they had to say and how it still impacts us today.

Join me on this journey as we explore the origins of the Christian faith.

Dr. Erwin W. Lutzer

¹Justin Pope, “Books Examine Jesus, as Part of U.S. History, Culture,” *The Chicago Sun Times*, 13 February 2004, p. 48.

PREFACE

THE DA VINCI CODE AT A GLANCE

Welcome to the mysterious world of conspiracy, secret codes, and historical documents hidden for as many centuries as the church has existed!

If you've not read *The Da Vinci Code*, I'll introduce you to the story and to some novel ideas you might not have heard before, such as:

- Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene!
- They had children who intermarried with the French royal line!
- And all this has been known for centuries, but the truth has been kept from the public for fear of destroying the power of the church! In fact, there is a highly secret organization that guards documents that, if made public, would destroy Christianity as we know it!

“Rumors of this conspiracy have been whispered for centuries,” says best-selling author Dan Brown in *The Da Vinci Code*. In fact, these rumors have appeared “in countless languages, including the languages of art, music, and literature.” And, we are told, some of the most dramatic evidence appears in the paintings of Leonardo da Vinci.

The Da Vinci Code has been on the best-seller lists for months, and with an upcoming movie based on the book, the story is sure to receive even wider circulation. If you’ve not read the novel, you probably know someone who has. Many are thinking that the book just might have some plausibility. Perhaps the historical evidence is shaky, but, as one reviewer asked, “Why can’t we believe that it *might* have happened?”

Before we answer that question, let’s take a look at the book’s premise. In brief, here’s the story: *The Da Vinci Code* opens with the curator of the Louvre lying dead in a pool of his own blood. Meanwhile, Robert Langdon, a Harvard professor and expert in esoteric symbolism, is in Paris on business. The French police track Langdon down at his hotel and ask him to interpret a strange cipher left on the body of the murder victim. Langdon is joined in his investigation by a young cryptologist named Sophie Neveu.

When Sophie privately warns Robert that he is the prime suspect in the murder, they flee. But the murder victim has intentionally left clues for them to follow. As they decipher his coded instructions, Robert and Sophie quickly realize that the crime is linked to the legendary search for the Holy Grail.

Quite providentially, the pair is able to link up with a Holy Grail fanatic, Sir Leigh Teabing, whose extensive knowledge and research fuel their efforts to find the Grail.

Teabing enthusiastically instructs the pair on matters that surround the events of the New Testament, including an alternate understanding of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and the true nature of the Holy Grail. He cites the Gnostic Gospels, ancient documents that supposedly give a more reliable account of Christ's life and teachings than the New Testament documents we know today.

Still sought by the authorities, Robert, Sophie, and now Sir Leigh flee to London and later Scotland, hoping to find more evidence about the murder and its connection to the Holy Grail. The reader is kept in suspense as these smart and determined characters pierce the hidden world of mystery and conspiracy in an attempt to overcome centuries of deceit and secrecy. Staying one step ahead of the police, they are able to use hidden codes and manuscripts that the church has tried to hide from the public.

Perhaps the most interesting part of the book—and lying at the heart of it—is the notion that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene and they had a daughter. Legend has it that after Jesus' crucifixion, Mary and her daughter, Sarah, went to Gaul, where they established the Merovingian line of French royalty. This dynasty, we are told, continues even today in the mysterious organization known as the Priory of Sion, a secret organization whose military wing was the

Knights Templar. Members of this organization supposedly include Leonardo da Vinci, Isaac Newton, and Victor Hugo. To this day, says Teabing, the relics of Mary and the records excavated by the Templars are guarded, shrouded in secrecy and mystery.

There is more: *The Da Vinci Code* reinterprets the Holy Grail as none other than the remains of Jesus' wife, Mary Magdalene, who held the blood of Jesus Christ in her womb while bearing his child.

The book claims that Jesus intended Mary Magdalene to lead the church, but "Peter had a problem with that," thus she was declared a prostitute and cut out of the role of leadership. Apparently, the church wanted a celibate male savior who would perpetuate male rule. So, after her husband was crucified, Mary disappeared with her child, resurfacing in Gaul. If this theory were true, descendents of Jesus could still be alive today.

Robert and Sir Leigh tell Sophie that the real story about Mary has been preserved in carefully hidden codes and symbols in order to avert the wrath of the Catholic Church. In these hidden codes, the Priory of Sion has been able to preserve its own version of Jesus and Mary's life together without telling the whole truth.

Leonardo da Vinci knew all this, we are told, and used his well-known painting *The Last Supper* to conceal many levels of meaning. In the painting John is sitting to the right of Jesus. But John's features are feminine; it turns out that the

person to the right of Jesus is not John after all, but rather Mary Magdalene. And, tellingly, Leonardo did not paint a cup or chalice on the table—another hint that the real Grail is Mary, sitting to the right of Jesus!

While Robert, Sophie, and Sir Leigh continue their investigation, the powerful Catholic organization Opus Dei is ready to use whatever means necessary—including assassination—to keep a lid on the secret. Flush with church money, Opus Dei is determined to force the top officials of the Priory to reveal the map to the Grail's location. If the secrets of the Priory were revealed, the church would be exposed as a fraud built on centuries of deceit.

Dan Brown's agenda is not so thinly veiled: This book is a direct attack against Jesus Christ, the church, and those of us who are his followers and call him Savior and Lord. Christianity, according to Dan Brown's novel, was invented to suppress women and to turn people away from the "divine feminine." Understandably, the book appeals to feminists, who see a return to goddess worship as a necessity to combat male supremacy.

The upshot of this theory is that Christianity is based on a big lie, or rather, several big lies. For one thing, Jesus was not God, but his followers attributed deity to him in order to consolidate male rule and to suppress those who worshipped the divine feminine. Indeed, according to Dan Brown, at the Council of Nicaea Constantine invented the idea of the deity of Christ so that he could eliminate all opposition, declaring

those who disagreed to be heretics. Further, Constantine also chose Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as the only Gospels because they fit his agenda of male power. Eighty other viable Gospels were rejected because they taught that Jesus wanted Mary Magdalene to be the real leader of the church. “It was all about power,” we’re told.

Incredibly, we learn that in the Old Testament, Israel worshipped both the male God Jehovah and his *feminine counterpart*, the Shekinah. Centuries later, the official church—the sex-hating, woman-hating church—suppressed this goddess worship and eliminated the divine feminine.

This concept of the divine feminine, which the church tried to suppress, is actually the pagan notion that in sex rituals the male and female experience God. “Physical union with the female remained the sole means through which man could become spiritually complete and ultimately achieve *gnosis*—knowledge of the divine.”¹ But this use of sex to commune directly with God posed a threat to the Catholic Church because it undermined its power. “For obvious reasons, they worked hard to demonize sex and recast it as a disgusting and sinful act. Other major religions did the same.”²

“Almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is *false*,” laments Teabing. The New Testament is simply the result of a male-dominated leadership that invented Christianity in order to control the Roman Empire and to oppress women. The real Jesus was the original feminist, but his wishes were ignored to foster the male agenda.

If *The DaVinci Code* were billed as just a novel, it would be an interesting read for conspiracy buffs who like a fast-paced thriller. What makes the book troublesome is that it purports to be based on facts. In the flyleaf, we read that the Priory of Sion exists, as does Opus Dei, a deeply devout Catholic sect that is controversial due to reports of brainwashing, coercion, and “corporal mortification.” Finally, we are told, “All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate.”

On his Web site, Dan Brown makes other statements about the historical reliability of the work. Some reviewers have praised the book for its “impeccable research.” One woman, when told that the novel was bunk, replied, “If it were not true it could not have been published!” One man said now that he has read the book, he will never be able to enter a church again.

Readers should know that the basic plot of this book has existed for centuries and can be found in esoteric and New Age literature such as *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* by Michael Baigent (1983), which is referenced in the novel. The difference is that Brown takes these legends and wraps them in a quasi-historical story that is being read by millions. Many who read the book are wondering if all, or at least some, of its claims might be true.

When ABC did a documentary on *The Da Vinci Code*, it gave credence to the novel, and, for the most part, ignored serious scholarship in favor of sensationalist rumor and ill-

founded speculation. Although the program ended with the statement, “We don’t have any proof,” it’s clear that the book was given some degree of respectability, with the implication that proof or not, Dan Brown just might be onto something.

Recently I read *The Templar Revelation: Secret Guardians of the True Identity of Christ*, written by Lynn Pickett and Clive Prince, which includes similar themes to *The Da Vinci Code* supposedly based on historical research. This book attempts to give validity to the idea that Mary Magdalene was the woman Jesus appointed to begin the church. It also contends that the New Testament is a sanitized account of cultic themes, including sex rituals.

How plausible is it that a conspiracy has kept the real story of Mary and Jesus under wraps? If it is true, the entire structure of Christian theology is a plot to deceive the masses. If it is true, the apostles were all party to this plot and were willing to give their lives for what they knew to be a lie. And if it is true, our faith—the faith of those of us who trust in Christ—is groundless.

Uncovering the Deception

Since *The Da Vinci Code* claims to be quasi-historical, it is important for us to ask: Is this book plausible? Many are wondering where Brown crosses the line between truth and fiction, between fact and fantasy. Is it just possible that someday, somewhere, we will discover that his version of history has credibility?

I've written this book in an attempt to answer these and other questions. We'll look at topics such as the Council of Nicaea, the Gnostic Gospels, the canon of the New Testament, and the paintings of Leonardo da Vinci. Was Jesus simply an inspiring leader who founded a religious movement? Did the Gnostics represent an early form of Christianity that was hijacked by the male-dominated apostles of the New Testament? In the process of answering these questions, I trust that your faith will be both challenged and strengthened.

It is not my intention to list all of the historical errors in *The Da Vinci Code*—that would be a lengthy list indeed. These false statements included: “Jesus was a historical figure of staggering influence . . . (he) inspired millions” when he was here on earth and “during three hundred years of witch hunts, the Church burned at the stake an astounding five *million* women.”³ These and other misstatements aren't really central to the basic attack the book makes against the Christian faith. I plan to focus instead on the scurrilous remarks made against Jesus and the Bible.

Following are several of the key questions we'll attempt to answer:

- Did Constantine invent the deity of Christ? And did the Council of Nicaea, which he convened, determine which books should be in the New Testament?
- Are the Gnostic Gospels reliable guides to New Testament history?

- Who determined what books would constitute the New Testament, and on what basis were the books included? When were these decisions made?
- Is it plausible that Mary Magdalene was married to Jesus?
- Was Opus Dei charged with destroying the Priory of Sion in order to suppress secrets about the real Jesus?
- Is it true that Gnosticism (to be defined later) is a viable “alternative Christianity” that might represent the true Christian faith?
- If we agree on God, do we also have to agree about Jesus?

Come with me on a journey that will lead us into the intriguing story of the origins of Christianity and those historical events that defined the Christian church.

Whether or not you have read *The Da Vinci Code*, I think you’ll benefit from a Christian response to the attacks being made against the Jesus of history.



ONE

CHRISTIANITY, A POLITICIAN, AND A CREED

We have good reason to be skeptical when a politician embraces religion—especially if religion helps him achieve his political ambitions.

Consider the emperor Constantine, who in *The Da Vinci Code* is said to have invented the deity of Christ in order to consolidate his power. And, we're told, he also eliminated those books from the New Testament that did not suit his political agenda.

In *The Da Vinci Code*, Brown asserts that by declaring the deity of Christ, Constantine solidified his rule and earned the right to declare those who disagreed with him as heretics. The emperor convened the Council of Nicaea in AD 325 to ratify this

new doctrine that would give him the clout he craved. Sir Leigh Teabing, the Holy Grail enthusiast, explains to Sophie that at the council the delegates agreed on the divinity of Jesus. Then he adds, “Until *that* moment in history, Jesus was viewed by His followers as a mortal prophet . . . a great and powerful man, but a *man* nonetheless. A mortal.”

So Constantine “upgraded Jesus’ status almost three centuries *after* Jesus’ death” for political reasons.¹ In the process, he secured male dominance and the suppression of women. By forcing others to accept his views, the emperor demonstrated his power and was free to kill all who opposed him.

The second allegation in the novel is that Constantine rejected other gospels that were favorable to the divine feminine. To quote Teabing again, “More than *eighty* gospels were considered for the New Testament, and yet only a relative few were chosen for inclusion—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John among them The Bible, as we know it today, was collated by the pagan Roman emperor Constantine the Great.”²

In other words, Constantine recognized a good deal when he saw it and therefore called the council to ensure male power and accept those canonical documents that were favorable to his political agenda. In the novel, Langdon says, “The Priory believes that Constantine and his male successors successfully converted the world from matriarchal paganism to patriarchal Christianity by waging a campaign of propaganda that demonized the sacred feminine, obliterating the goddess from modern religion forever.”³ With this

accomplishment, the course of church history was solidified according to Constantine's liking. "Remember it was all about power," we are told.

Let's begin to investigate these claims. In this chapter we'll separate fact from fiction, look into the ancient records, and discover exactly what Constantine did and didn't do.

Church historians agree that next to the events in the New Testament, the most important event in the history of Christianity is the conversion of Emperor Constantine to Christianity in AD 312. In brief, here's the story: Constantine's troops were positioned at the Milvian Bridge just outside of Rome, where they were preparing to overthrow the Roman emperor Maxentius. A victory would, in effect, make Constantine the sole ruler of the empire. But the night before the battle, Constantine saw a vision that changed his life and the history of the church.

In the words of Eusebius of Caesarea, who was both a historian and a confidant of Constantine, the emperor was praying to a pagan god when "he saw with his own eyes the trophy of a cross in the light of the heavens, above the sun and an inscription, *Conquer By This* attached to it. . . . Then in his sleep the Christ of God appeared to him with the sign which he had seen in the heavens, and commanded him to make a likeness of this sign which he had seen in the heavens, and to use it as a safeguard in all engagements with his enemies."⁴

To make a long story short, Constantine crossed over the bridge and won the battle, fighting under the banner of the

Christian cross. Later he issued the Edict of Milan, decreeing that Christians were no longer to be persecuted. And now, although a politician, he took leadership in the doctrinal disputes that were disrupting the unity in his empire.

Let's travel back to Nicaea (modern-day Iznik in Turkey, about 125 miles from modern-day Istanbul) to find out what happened there 1,700 years ago.

WELCOME TO THE COUNCIL

Those of us reared in a country where religion is largely private and where diversity is gladly tolerated might find it difficult to believe that in the early fourth century, doctrinal disputes were tearing Constantine's empire apart. It is said that if you bought a loaf of bread in the marketplace of Constantinople, you might be asked whether you believe that God the Son was begotten or unbegotten and if you asked about the quality of the bread you might be told that the Father is greater and the Son is less.

Adding fuel to these disagreements was a man named Arius, who was gaining a wide following by teaching that Christ was not fully God but a created god of sorts. He believed that Christ was more than a man but less than God. Arius was a great communicator, and because he put his doctrinal ideas into musical jingles, his ideas became widely accepted. Although many church bishops declared him a heretic, the disputes nonetheless continued. Constantine called the first ecumenical council at Nicaea, hoping to sup-

press dissent and unify Christianity. In fact, the emperor even paid the expenses of the bishops who gathered.

Constantine did not care about the finer points of theology, so practically any creed would have satisfied him—as long as it would unify his subjects. As one historian has said, “Christianity became both a way to God and a way to unite the empire.”⁵ He gave the opening speech himself, telling the delegates that doctrinal disunity was worse than war.

This intrusion of a politician into the doctrines and procedures of the church was resented by some of the delegates, but welcomed by others. For those who had gone through a period of bitter persecution, this conference, carried on under the imperial banner, was heaven on earth.

THE GREAT DEBATE

More than three hundred bishops met at Nicaea to settle disputes about Christology—that is, the doctrine of Christ. When Constantine finished his opening speech, the proceedings began.

Overwhelmingly, the council declared Arius a heretic. Though Arius was given an opportunity to defend his views, the delegates recognized that if Christ was not fully God, then God was not the Redeemer of mankind. To say that Christ was created was to deny the clear teaching of Scripture: “For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him” (Colossians

1:16). Clearly, if he created *all* things, he most assuredly could not have been created himself! To this passage many others that teach the deity of Christ were added, both from the Gospels and the Epistles (John 1:1; Romans 9:5; Hebrews 1:8; etc.).

Affirming the divinity of Jesus, the delegates turned their attention to the question of how he related to the Father. Eusebius the historian presented his view, claiming that Jesus had a nature that was *similar* to that of God the Father.

Present, but not invited to the actual proceedings, was the theologian Athanasius, who believed that even to say that Christ is *similar* to God the Father is to miss the full biblical teaching about Christ's divinity. His argument that Christ could only be God in the fullest sense if his nature was the *same* as that of the Father was expressed by his representative, Marcellus, a bishop from Asia Minor in the proceedings. Constantine, seeing that the debate was going in Athanasius's favor, accepted the suggestion of a scholarly bishop and advised the delegates to use the Greek word *homoousion*, which means "one and the same." In other words, Jesus had the very *same* nature as the Father.

The council agreed, and today we have the famous Nicene Creed. As anyone who has ever quoted the creed knows, Jesus Christ is declared to be "Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, *being of one substance* with the Father, by whom all things were made" (italics added). There can be no question that the delegates affirmed that Christ was deity in the fullest sense.

Why should we be interested in this debate? Some critics have been amused that the Council of Nicaea split over one “iota.” The difference between the Greek words for *similar* and *same* is but one letter of the alphabet: the letter *i*. Some argue that it’s just like theologians to split hairs, arguing over minutiae that have little to do with the real world. How much better to help the poor or get involved in the politics of the day!

But William E. Hordern tells a story that illustrates how a single letter or comma can change the meaning of a message. Back in the days when messages were sent by telegraph there was a code for each punctuation mark. A woman touring Europe cabled her husband to ask whether she could buy a beautiful bracelet for \$75,000. The husband sent this message back: “No, price too high.” The cable operator, in transmitting the message, missed the signal for the comma. The woman received the message “No price too high.” She bought the bracelet; the husband sued the company and won! After that, people using Morse code spelled out all punctuation. Clearly, a comma or an “iota” can make a big difference when communicating a message!⁶

Although the Council of Nicaea was divided over the Greek words *similar* and *same*, the issue was incredibly important. Even if Christ were the highest and most noble creature of God’s creation, God would then be only indirectly involved in the salvation of man. As one historian has said, Athanasius realized that “only if Christ is God, without qualification, has God entered humanity, and only then have fel-

lowship with God, the forgiveness of sins, the truth of God, and immortality been certainly brought to men.”⁷

In *The Da Vinci Code*, we read that the doctrine of Christ’s deity passed by a “relatively close vote.” That is fiction, since only five out of more than three hundred bishops (the number is actually believed to have been 318) protested the creed. In fact, in the end, only two refused to sign it. The outcome was not exactly a cliff-hanger.

That’s not to say that the Council of Nicaea ended all the disputes. Arianism continued to have its adherents, and subsequent emperors sided with whichever view suited them at the time. But from this point on, Christian orthodoxy maintained that Jesus was “God of very God.”

Whether Constantine was a genuine convert to Christianity is a matter of debate. We do know that he had been a worshipper of the sun god before his “conversion,” and it appears that he carried on such worship for the rest of his life. He is even credited with standardizing Christian worship by mandating Sunday as the official day of worship. There is no doubt that he used Christianity to further his own political ends.

But did he invent the divinity of Jesus? Before the council, was Christ believed to be just a remarkable man? There is not a single shred of historical evidence for such a notion. Not only was Christ’s deity the consensus of the delegates, but as can easily be shown, this doctrine was held by the church centuries *before* the council met.

Contrary to Teabing's claim in *The Da Vinci Code*, many believed that Christ was more than a "mortal prophet" before the council met in AD 325. We must take a moment to read the writings of the apostolic fathers, those who knew the apostles and were taught by them. Then we can investigate writings of the second- and third-generation leaders, all affirming in their own way the divinity of Jesus.

THE CHURCH FATHERS

Let me introduce you to someone who longed to die for Jesus. That was the attitude of Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch in Syria. In AD 110, he wrote a series of letters to several churches while on his way to martyrdom in Rome. The centerpiece of his doctrine was his conviction that Christ is God Incarnate. "There is One God who manifests himself through Jesus Christ his son."⁸ Another source elaborates further: Ignatius speaks of Jesus as "Son of Mary and Son of God . . . Jesus Christ our Lord," calling Jesus "God Incarnate." In fact, he refers to him as "Christ God."⁹ Remember, he wrote this a full two hundred years *before* the Council of Nicaea!

Other examples include the following:

- Polycarp of Smyrna, a disciple of the apostle John, sent a letter to the church at Philippi in about AD 112–118. In it, he assumes that those to whom it is addressed acknowledge the divinity of Jesus, his exaltation to heaven, and his subsequent glorification. Polycarp was martyred in about AD 160 and gave testimony of his faith in the presence of his executioners.¹⁰

- Justin Martyr was born in Palestine and was impressed with the ability of Christians to face death heroically. When he heard the gospel, he converted to Christianity and became a defender of the faith he loved. He said Christ was “the son and the apostle of God the Father and master of all.”¹¹ He was born about AD 100 and martyred in AD 165.
- Irenaeus became the bishop of Lyons in AD 177. He spent much of his life combating the heresy of Gnosticism that we will examine in the next chapter. Speaking of passages such as John 1:1, he wrote that “all distinctions between the Father and the Son vanish, for the one God made all things through His word.”¹²

To this list could be added teachers like Tertullian (150–212), who one hundred years before Constantine advocated a fully divine and fully human Christ. Dozens of other writings from the early centuries of Christianity prove that the early church affirmed the deity of Jesus. Their convictions were rooted in the New Testament Scriptures that were already accepted as authoritative by the church. For the two and a half centuries *before* Nicaea, the nearly universal opinion of the church was that Christ was divine, just as the Scriptures taught.

THE WITNESS OF THE MARTYRS

We find more evidence that the divinity of Christ was not Constantine’s idea when we remind ourselves of the persecutions in Rome. If we had belonged to a small congregation in Rome in the second or third century, we might have heard an

announcement like this: “The emperor [Caesar Augustus] has issued a new order, requiring all Roman subjects to attend the religious/political ceremony designed to unify the nation and revive lagging patriotism within the empire.” The Romans believed that if one had a god above Caesar, that person could not be trusted at a time of national emergency—a war, for instance. All good citizens were commanded to “worship the spirit of Rome and the genius of the emperor,” as the edict read. Specifically, this ceremony involved the burning of incense and saying simply, “Caesar is Lord.”

Sometimes persecution was directly targeted against those who worshipped Jesus. But for the most part, Caesar did not care what god a person worshipped. After one made the yearly obligatory confession that Caesar was Lord, that person was free to worship whatever god he or she wished—including Jesus. Christian congregations—and there were many of them—had to make a tough choice: They either complied as citizens or faced cruel retribution. Many of the Christians had watched as their relatives and friends were thrown to wild beasts or killed by gladiators for refusing to confess Caesar’s lordship.

If Jesus were seen as one option among many, Christians could give allegiance to other expressions of the divine. Why not find common ground with the central unity of all religions? Not only would this have promoted harmony, but also the common good of the state. So the choice, strictly speaking, was not whether the Christians would

worship Christ or Caesar but whether they would worship Christ *and* Caesar.

If you ever have the opportunity to visit Rome, don't miss the Pantheon, one of the most ancient and beautiful buildings still standing today, completed in AD 126. It is a masterpiece of perfection with a grand hemispherical dome. This was the Roman "temple of the gods," the place where all the various gods of ancient Rome were housed. Filled with statues and artifacts, it is here that Rome's diverse religious worship was localized.

Interestingly, the pagans saw no conflict between emperor worship and the worship of their own gods. Paganism, both ancient and modern, has always been tolerant of other finite gods. After all, if your god is not a supreme deity, then indeed you have little choice but to make room for other gods and celebrate the splendor of diversity.

But the Christians understood something very clearly: If Christ was God—and they believed he was—indeed, if he was "God of very God," then they could not worship him and others. Thus, while some bowed to Caesar in order to save their life and their family, many of them—thousands of them—were willing to defy the political authorities and pay dearly for their commitment.

After an intense time of persecution for those who affirmed the divinity of Jesus, the unexpected happened. The emperor decided that the persecution of Christians should end. To make good on his word, he commissioned that a

statue of Jesus be put in the Pantheon as an expression of goodwill and proof that Jesus was now regarded as a legitimate god, along with all the rest. But the Christians said, in effect, “Thanks, but no thanks.” They understood that the divinity of Jesus meant that he could not be put on the same shelf as the pagan gods.

My point is simply that centuries before Constantine, these early Christians had already proved that they believed that Jesus was divine. And they paid for their convictions with reprisals, harassment, and often death. *The Da Vinci Code*’s assertion that Constantine “upgraded Jesus’ status” from man to God is pure fiction.

No wonder the mark of a heretic in New Testament times was someone who denied the Incarnation. “Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God” (1 John 4:2-3). The conviction that, in Christ, God became man was the heart of the early Christian faith.

THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA AND THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

The Da Vinci Code claims—as do many occult writings—that Constantine and his delegates decided to eliminate books from the New Testament that were unfavorable to their theology of male rule and their commitment to sexual repression. We’ve already quoted Sir Leigh Teabing as saying that more than eighty gospels were considered for the New Testa-

ment and that the Bible as we know it today was collated by Constantine.

I read a similar view in *The Templar Revelation*, a book that dovetails with *The Da Vinci Code*, supposedly giving historical plausibility to these events. The authors allege: “In our opinion, the Catholic Church never wanted its members to know about the true relationship between Jesus and Mary, which is why the Gnostic Gospels were not included in the New Testament and why most Christians do not even know they exist. The Council of Nicaea, when it rejected the many Gnostic Gospels and voted to include only Matthew, Mark, Luke and John in the New Testament, had no divine mandate for this major act of censorship. They acted out of self-preservation, for by that time—the fourth century—the power of the Magdalene and her followers was already too widespread for the patriarchy to cope with.”¹³

We’ll look closer at matters regarding the formation of the canon and the life of Mary Magdalene later in this book. But for now, consider this: Historical works on Nicaea give no evidence that Constantine and the delegates even discussed the Gnostic Gospels or anything that pertained to the canon. Try as I might, I have not found a single line in the documents about Nicaea that records a discussion about what books should or should not be in the New Testament. Practically everything we know about what happened at Nicaea comes from the historian Eusebius, and neither he nor anyone else gives a hint that such matters were discussed. Twenty rulings

were issued at Nicaea, and the contents of all of them are still in existence; not one of them refers to issues regarding the canon.

Thankfully, I was able to track down the source of the error. Baron D'Holbach in *Ecce Homo* writes, "The question of authentic and spurious gospels was not discussed at the first Nicene Council. The anecdote is fictitious."¹⁴ D'Holbach traces the fiction to Voltaire, but further research reveals an even earlier source of the rumor.

An anonymous document called *Vetus Synodicon*, written in about AD 887, devotes a chapter to each of the ecumenical councils held until that time. However, the compiler adds details not found in the writings of historians. As for his account of Nicaea, he writes that the council dealt with matters of the divinity of Jesus, the Trinity, and the canon. He writes, "The canonical and apocryphal books it distinguished in the following manner: in the house of God the books were placed down by the holy altar; then the council asked the Lord in prayer that the inspired works be found on top and—as in fact happened. . . ."¹⁵ That, quite obviously, is the stuff of legend. No primary documents pertaining to Nicaea make reference to such a procedure.

Even if this story were true, it would still not prove the claim that the council rejected certain books of the New Testament because they promoted feminism or the notion that Mary Magdalene was married to Jesus. These matters simply did not come up for discussion.

Speaking of legends, another claims that after the two bishops who did not sign the Nicene Creed died, the church fathers, not willing to alter the miraculous number of 318 (apparently the number of delegates present), placed the creed sans their signature in their tombs overnight, “where-upon miraculously their signatures were also added.”¹⁶ These kinds of superstitions flourished through medieval times.

Later, we’ll learn that Constantine did ask that fifty Bibles be copied for the churches of Constantinople. But *The Da Vinci Code*’s assertion that Constantine tampered with the Scriptures or excluded certain books is bogus. This is a reminder that legends are often confused with facts in such a way that the legends appear to replace the facts. When one presents history without consulting the sources, anything the mind can imagine can be written. As fabrications go, *The Da Vinci Code* is right up there with Elvis sightings.

HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF

We’ve learned that the official Roman government abhorred the exclusivism of Christianity, the idea that Christ is the only way to God. The Romans bristled at the very suggestion that Christ stood above other gods—indeed, claiming that no other gods even existed. To them, it was both politically and religiously intolerable for Christians to insist that there was only one legitimate Redeemer who was willing to come to the aid of mankind. They were tolerant of everyone except those who were intolerant.

In the next chapter we will see that another powerful attack against the Christian faith came not from the political establishment but from religious zealots who wanted to make Christianity doctrinally diverse. Although Gnosticism was a religious and not a political movement, it had the same motivation as the Roman government—it could not tolerate the exclusive claims made by Jesus Christ. Gnostics cynically used the Christian faith as it suited them rather than accepting what they regarded as the narrow doctrines taught by the early church.

As we investigate Gnosticism, we will see that it bears striking similarities to the modern-day quest for spirituality. Gnosticism invites its followers to divide loyalties between Jesus and lesser competing deities. Gnosticism says our real need is not for forgiveness but for self-enlightenment. Jesus, claim the Gnostics, can help us, but he is not necessary to our quest for salvation.

Gnosticism rejects the conclusion of Nicaea, unless of course, we are all seen as divine. Like the New Agers of today, Gnostics believed that each person can encounter God in his own way. Little wonder Paul wrote, “For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear” (2 Timothy 4:3).

Join me as we investigate the Gnostic documents.

ENDNOTES

Preface

¹ Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 308.

² Ibid., 309.

³ Ibid., 125.

Chapter One

¹ Ibid., 233.

² Ibid., 231.

³ Ibid., 124.

⁴ Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1997), 50.

⁵ Ibid., 51.

⁶ William E. Hordern, *A Layman's Guide to Protestant Theology* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 15–16.

⁷ Reinhold Seeberg, *The History of Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1964), 211.

⁸ E. H. Klotsche, *The History of Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 18.

⁹ Geoffrey Bromiley, *Historical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1978), 4.

¹⁰ Seeberg, *History of Doctrine*, 69.

¹¹ Bromiley, *Historical Theology*, 14.

¹² Ibid., 20.

¹³ Lynn Picknett and Clive Prince, *The Templar Revelation: Secret Guardians of the True Identity of Christ* (New York: Touchstone Books, Simon & Schuster, 1998), 261.

¹⁴ <http://www.tertullian.org>

¹⁵ As above.

¹⁶ As above.