

## *The Da Vinci Code: What Does Christianity Really Teach?*

### Did the Church Rewrite History?

Luke 1:1-4

#### **Introduction**

Today we are beginning a series of messages addressing some of the issues raised by Dan Brown's thriller fiction novel *The Da Vinci Code*. We've entitled this series: *The Da Vinci Code – What Does Christianity Really Teach?*

Now as I look out over this crowd, I realize that there are probably at least three types of responses to what we're talking about in this series. There are skeptics here today who came because you have honest questions. Maybe you've read the book or maybe you haven't. But you know enough about the plot line and the serious questions it raises about Christianity that you want some concrete answers. You may not be a Christ-follower yourself, but you're on an honest quest for truth.

There are others among us who openly declare themselves to be disciples of Jesus Christ. You attend here on a near weekly basis. You know that this recent book by Dan Brown and the upcoming movie by Ron Howard and Columbia Pictures poses a serious challenge to some of your most fundamental beliefs. You're here because you also want answers to some of these questions.

Thirdly, there are some here I'm sure – and I hope they are very few in number – who wonder why in the world we are doing such a series. You're somewhat down-in-the-mouth about the whole idea. Maybe you feel that if we just ignore the book and the movie, it will all go away. Unfortunately, this has been too often the stance of the church of Jesus Christ. For those who might have this tendency, I would remind you of what the Apostle Peter tells us: “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1 Peter 3:15-16 *NIV*). But to give answers we've got to know what the questions are.

Actually, Dan Brown's book *The Da Vinci Code* has given us a tremendous opportunity, not only to clarify some of the basic tenets of our faith, but also to share that faith with others. Just in the last few months, from a train ride in southern France to a ski lift at Mt Hood Meadows, I've dialogued about this book and seen opportunity to share my faith in Jesus Christ. Translated into more than 40 languages and having sold more than 36 million copies, every church, museum and chateau mentioned in the book have become major tourist attractions. But

while it is motivating Christians to re-examine what they believe, it is also driving many away from the message of the gospel. Irwin Lutzer, pastor of Moody Memorial Church in Chicago, recently spoke with someone who told him (having read *The Da Vinci Code*), “I will never set foot in a church again. Now I know the real story behind Christianity.”

### **Summary of the Claims of *The Da Vinci Code***

Just what is the “real story” behind Christianity that Dan Brown proposes in his book? Listen to this summary by Lee Strobel, author of *The Case for Faith*.

#### **DVD clip (4 minutes)**

If you’ve seen *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, you now know that Harrison Ford and Sean Connery got it all wrong. You are now an expert on these matters. At least as much of an expert as Dan Brown!

I read *The Da Vinci Code* about a year ago and without a doubt, it’s a page-turner! Bizarre, intriguing, clandestine, the reader is irresistibly drawn into a puzzling maze of events and characters. I felt with each page that I was back in the city of Paris that I had grown to love. The problem is not the popularity of the book; that I fully understand. The problem is with the *claims* of the book.

In the guise of a thriller, Brown gives a post-modern spin to the biblical account of Jesus Christ. Brown further claims that this work is part of his own personal quest for understanding. In other words, for Brown the book is more philosophical than fictional. In an interview on ABC’s 20/20, Dan Brown spoke of his “conversion” to a new way of thinking. He acknowledged that he sees himself on a mission to bring this new religious message to mainstream America.

While the characters in the story line are fictional, Brown believes the statements concerning documents and artwork are factual. And this is the rub. In an NBC Today Show interview with Matt Lauer, Dan Brown was asked: “How much of this is based on reality in terms of things that actually occurred?” His response? “Absolutely all of it ... all of the art, architecture, secret rituals, secret societies— all of that is historical fact.”<sup>i</sup> Of course, on the very first page of his novel, he states the same thing: “All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents and secret rituals in this novel are accurate” (*Da Vinci Code*, p. 1).

Listen. If such is the case, here's the bottom line: (1) the Bible is not dependable; (2) Jesus is not the Son of God; and (3) the Church is responsible for the grand conspiracy of rewriting history. Obviously, if those three premises are true, then Christianity doesn't have a leg to stand on.

### **Did the Church Rewrite History?**

I'd like to begin today with that third issue: Did the Church really rewrite history as Dan Brown proposes in his book? How do we know that what Christians believe about the Bible and about Jesus Christ has not been tampered with in the early centuries of church history?

Leigh Teabing, the supposedly well-versed historian in *The Da Vinci Code*, has an interesting twist on how good history is written. Listen to his words taken directly from book:

“History is always written by the winners. When two cultures clash, the loser is obliterated, and the winner writes the history books—books which glorify their own cause and disparage the conquered foe. As Napoleon once said, ‘What is history, but a fable agreed upon?’”<sup>ii</sup>

At the very heart of Dan Brown's thesis is this: *Power hungry and politically motivated leaders of the early church intentionally squelched the truth about the identity of Jesus and the reliability of the Bible.*

Given this thesis, for the last two thousands years Christians have believed a lie based on a massive cover-up, a wide-scale conspiracy by the Church (specifically the Catholic Church) to keep the truth under wraps. The Church has suppressed the truth about the true identity of Jesus Christ, the origin of the Bible, and the important role of Mary Magdalene in order to maintain its position of power and influence. According to Brown, Christians were the “winners” in the power struggle during the first few centuries of the church. As such, they were able to rewrite history from their own standpoint. Essentially, they staged a “fable agreed upon.” This fable was the idea that Jesus was divine and that he rose from the dead.

Well, it seems that Luke, the writer of the third Gospel, has somewhat of a different take on this issue of historical accuracy. And by the way, Luke was certainly not a “winner” in Dan Brown's terms, having been martyred for his faith. Listen to what he says in the introduction to his gospel (Luke 1:1-4):

Most honorable Theophilus: Many people have written accounts about the events that took place among us. They used as their source material the reports circulating among us from the early disciples and other eyewitnesses of what God has done in fulfillment of his promises. Having carefully investigated all of these accounts from the beginning, I have decided to write a careful summary for you, to reassure you of the truth of all you were taught. Luke 1:1-4 *NLT*

Who was Luke? He never uses his own name in this gospel, but from Paul we know that he was “Luke, the beloved physician” (Colossians 4:14). He was a man with high academic training as a medical doctor and faithfully ministered to Paul’s needs (2 Timothy 4:9-16). He was an historian of great intellect, writing in exquisite Greek style both in Luke and in Acts. I’ll never forget having to translate the New Testament while in seminary. Paul’s epistles were relatively easy, as was the gospel of John. Luke and Acts were some of the most difficult. Most believe that Luke wrote this gospel before Paul was martyred in 65 AD, within only 30 years of the events of Christ’s life.

Luke tells us that he thoroughly researched what he wrote. He spoke to eyewitnesses that could have included Mary the mother of Jesus, his brothers, the seventy disciples and Mary Magdalene herself (Luke 10:1; Matthew 12:47-49). In all, Luke names thirty-two countries, fifty-four cities, and nine islands without error. In contrast, Mr. Dan Brown can’t even get right the number of paned glasses in the pyramid outside the Louvre, stating that there are 666 when there are in fact 673.<sup>iii</sup>

Well, the number of paned glasses in the pyramid at the Louvre is really of little consequence. Such trivial matters really don’t affect our lives. But there are many claims that Dan Brown makes in his book that are of great consequence. I want to give a brief introduction to two of these that will be looking at more closely over the next few weeks.

## **Reliability of the Bible**

First, we have the issue of the *reliability* of the Bible. Really, everything stands or falls on this issue.

What is Dan Brown’s take on this in his book *The Da Vinci Code*? Here’s what he states through his fictional characters:

“The Bible did not arrive by fax from heaven...the Bible is a product of *man*, my dear. Not of God...Man created it as a historical record of tumultuous times, and it has evolved through countless translations, additions, and revisions. History had never had a definitive version of the book.” (*Da Vinci Code*, 231).

“The fundamental irony of Christianity! The Bible, as we know it today, was collated by the pagan Roman emperor Constantine the Great.” (*Da Vinci Code*, 231)

“Constantine commissioned and financed a new Bible, which omitted those gospels that spoke of Christ’s human traits and embellished those gospels that made him godlike. The *earlier gospels* were outlawed, gathered up and burned.” (*Da Vinci Code*, 234)

Behind such statements are two basic theories that Dan Brown holds as historical fact.

- First, that certain “Gnostic gospels” (a term we’ll explain further next week) offer the most dependable account of the life of Christ.
- Second, that the emperor Constantine at the Council of Nicea in 325 AD, rejecting these Gnostic gospels, personally “commissioned and financed” his own version of the Bible in order to promote his personal political agenda.

Next week we’ll look in detail at this claim as we examine the evidence supporting the Old and New Testaments as we have them today. Just to wet your appetite, however, notice this. Dan Brown argues through his fictional characters that the “earlier gospels were outlawed, gathered up and burned.” One thing can be said in Browns favor. He at least says he favors the “earlier gospels.” The problem, however, is that he fails to recognize that the four gospels of our Bible – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – *are* the “earliest gospels,” all written within 50 years of Christ’s life.

Here’s a summary of when the books of the New Testament that we hold in our hands was written:

Matthew	70-80 AD
Mark	50-60 AD
Luke	60-65 AD
John	80-100 AD
Paul's Letters	50-66 AD

In fact, William Albright, one of the world's foremost biblical archeologists, said: "We can already say emphatically that there is no longer any solid basis for dating any book of the New Testament after about AD 80."<sup>iv</sup> Today, many scholars believe that all of the New Testament books were completed before the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70.

In contrast to our four gospels, the Gnostic texts from which Dan Brown draws his ideas about Jesus Christ, were written between 200 and 350 AD. In contrast to these late-dated forgeries, listen to what the biblical writers say about the New Testament Scriptures:

We are telling you about what we ourselves have actually seen and heard, so that you may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. 1 John 1:3 NLT

For we were not making up clever stories when we told you about the power of our Lord Jesus Christ and his coming again. We have seen his majestic splendor with our own eyes. 2 Peter 1:16 NLT

So the question is this. Who is making up the "clever stories," the "fables agreed upon"? The New Testament writers who all had first-hand experience with Jesus Christ? Or Dan Brown and his team of 3<sup>rd</sup> Century Gnostic writers?

### **Divinity of Jesus Christ**

Not only does Brown challenge the reliability of the Bible, but also the divinity of Jesus Christ. His claims here are also twofold:

First, Jesus Christ was actually married to Mary Magdalene and had a child named Sarah. According to Brown, this was the greatest cover-up in history. In his own words (or rather the words of his fictional character Teabing):

"...the greatest cover-up in human history. Not only was Jesus Christ married, but He was a father...A child of Jesus would undermine the critical

notion of Christ's divinity and therefore the Christian Church..." (*Da Vinci Code*, pp. 249, 254).

According to Brown, Leonardo Da Vinci knew all of this as the Grand Master of a secret society called the Priory of Sion (more on this next week). More than that, he secretly encoded this knowledge into his paintings, specifically the painting of the *Last Supper* (picture of Last Supper). Brown's fictional character says:

"The Last Supper practically shouts at the viewer that Jesus and Magdalene were a pair." (*Da Vinci Code*, p 243)

Where does Dan Brown get his idea that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene? He gets it from what he calls the "earliest records" of Christianity, the Gnostic texts, such as the *Gospel of Philip*:

He supposedly quotes from this "gospel" in *The Da Vinci Code*. Here's how his fictional character cites the passage from the Gospel of Philip:

"And the *companion* of the Savior is Mary Magdalene. Christ loved her more than all the disciples and used to kiss her often on her mouth. The rest of the disciples were offended by it and expressed disapproval. They said to him, 'Why do you love her more than all of us?'" (*Da Vinci Code*, p. 246)

However, the actual text reads like this due to corruption:

"And Mary the companion of [...] Mary Magdalene. [...]loved] her more than all the disciples [and used to] kiss her on her [...]. *Gospel of Philip* 63:32-64:10

The fallacy of Brown's argument is almost laughable. The argument goes that Mary is called the "companion" of Jesus. And since "companion" in Aramaic can mean "wife," it is assumed that this is the meaning of the text. I say laughable, because the Gospel of Philip wasn't even written in Aramaic, but in Coptic and originally in Greek. And in Greek, the word "companion" doesn't mean "wife."

In summary, here's the problem with Dan Brown's thesis that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene:

- The Gospel of Philip doesn't say that Jesus was married.
- The Gospel of Philip was written 250 years after Jesus died.
- The Gospel of Philip wasn't written by Philip.

Philip the Apostle died in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century. So this book we are supposed to trust is written by someone nearly 200 years *after* Philip who makes a false claim about himself before he even begins to write.

But the second claim Brown makes about the nature of Christ has to do with the Council of Nicaea in the year 325 AD. Here's Brown's take on what took place, again through the words of his fictional character Teabing:

“At this gathering...many aspects of Christianity were debated and voted up – the date of Easter, the role of the bishops, the administration of the sacraments, and, of course, the divinity of Jesus...Jesus' establishment as 'the Son of God' was officially proposed and voted on by the Council of Nicaea...A relatively close vote at that.” (*Da Vinci Code*, p 233)

The fact of the matter is that the The Council of Nicaea in 325 AD was convened in order to respond to the heretical claims of Arius, an Alexandrian pastor who was teaching that Jesus was not God-in-the-flesh. What Brown doesn't tell us is that Arius believed that Jesus was sinless, created the universe, and was a unique and special created being – not a mere man. But in the debate, the Council only reaffirmed the historic Christian view. It certainly did not invent the doctrine of the deity and eternity of Christ. And by no means was the decision of the council on this issue a close “vote.” Only 2 of 300 bishops chose not to sign the Nicene Creed.

Was the idea of Jesus as the Son of God “officially proposed and voted on” at the Council of Nicaea? Of course not. The earliest documents available to us attribute deity to Jesus Christ. Paul writes to the Roman Christians before 60 AD “For if you confess with your mouth that *Jesus is Lord* and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9 *NLT*). And then also to the Philippians:

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place  
and gave him the name that is above every name,  
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
and every tongue confess that *Jesus Christ is Lord*,  
to the glory of God the Father. Phil 2:9-11 *NIV*

These words from the pen of Paul were written well over 200 years before the Council of Nicaea. But is this view that Jesus was already widely regarded as God

reflected in *The Da Vinci Code*? Not at all. Again, it is Brown that is rewriting history, not the church.

## **Conclusion**

According to Dan Brown, history is written by the winners. History is nothing but a “fable agreed upon” by those who manage to gain supremacy over others. But is that really the case? Does this idea correspond to reality?

The problem with such a theory is that during the time in which the New Testament books were written, the Christians were far from what you could call “winners.” They were in the minority, fiercely persecuted by both Jews and Romans, and many were martyred. Are these the ones Brown considers “winners?”

Take the Apostle Peter, for example. In speaking to hostile crowds on Pentecost he says:

“People of Israel, listen! God publicly endorsed Jesus of Nazareth by doing wonderful miracles, wonders, and signs through him, as you well know. But you followed God’s prearranged plan. With the help of lawless Gentiles, you nailed him to the cross and murdered him. However, God released him from the horrors of death and raised him back to life again, for death could not keep him in its grip.” Acts 2:22-25 *NLT*

Here Peter is speaking to hostile audience. If the facts weren’t correct, all they had to do was to stop the “preach,” go get the body of Jesus, and wheel it out on cart and demonstrate that Peter was twisting the facts. But they couldn’t do that. Nor did they even try. Moreover, such a bold proclamation of the gospel led ultimately to Peter’s death. Tradition tells us he was crucified upside down. Not exactly a “winner” from the world’s perspective as Dan Brown would have us believe.

Or take the Apostle John, whom Dan Brown says is replaced at Jesus’ right by Mary Magdalene in the painting of the Last Supper. Banished to the Island of Patmos in his later life, he was far from a “winner” in contemporary terms. But this is what he says in his gospel:

This report is from an eyewitness giving an accurate account; it is presented so that you also can believe. John 19:35 *NLT*

And that is the invitation that Jesus Christ holds out to you today. “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.” And when you do, you’ll be a real “winner,” not just in this life, but for all of eternity.

---

<sup>i</sup> NBC Today, October 10, 2005. As cited in James L. Garlow and Peter Jones, *Cracking Da Vinci’s Code* (Colorado Springs: Victor, 2004), 24.

<sup>ii</sup> “It’s interesting to note,” says Brown, “that since the beginning of recorded time, history has been written by the ‘winners’ (those societies and belief systems that conquered and survived). Many historians now believe (as do I) that in gauging the historical accuracy of a given concept, we should first ask ourselves a far deeper question: *How historically accurate is history itself.*” Garlow and Jones, 25. Emphasis mine.

<sup>iii</sup> Sharon Newman, *The Real History Behind the Da Vinci Code* (New York: Berkley Books, 2005), 225.

<sup>iv</sup> Albright, *RDBL*, 136