

Dealing with the Da Vinci Code – Part 2

The Da Vinci Code was an international bestselling book and blockbuster film by Dan Brown, which became the centre of a storm of controversy and the talk of both believers and unbelievers. How should Christians respond to this?

Well, two reactions would be wrong. One would be to see this as a crisis, a huge assault on the faith, and to go into panic mode, debating it with shrill voices. That kind of reaction is exactly what the world wants to see: Christians not defending the faith, but being defensive about the faith. The other wrong reaction would be to turn a blind eye to the whole controversy.

Like it or not, Dan Brown made assertions about Jesus Christ our Lord, and the world is in some measure interested to hear what the church has to say about it. On some level, you will probably interact with friends, family, colleagues or others who are unsaved and will be curious to know a Christian's take on the assertions made by Dan Brown. Remember, the truth is never under threat. The truth remains firm, regardless of what liars may say.

What is at stake, though, is people's belief in the truth. Where there is the opportunity of exposing lies and allowing the truth of the Gospel to shine in, I believe Christians should take it with both hands. In Part 1 of this mini-series, we dealt with one of the key assertions made in *The Da Vinci Code* – that is that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene. We saw that marriage does nothing to the divinity of Jesus, and furthermore, that Jesus did not marry.

Now let's address a second major assertion that Dan Brown made. Brown suggests that the early Christians knew all about the marriage of Jesus, and they regarded him as human, not divine. He says that the early Christians believed in the sacred feminine. Then comes the assertion that all this changed due to a power struggle within Christianity.

According to Brown, one of the factions in Christianity was intent on male domination. This all came to a head at the Council of Nicea, where emperor Constantine, for political reasons, ruled in favour of one of the factions. From that day forth, Jesus was elevated to the level of divinity, women began to be oppressed, and the sacred feminine was now undermined.

Furthermore, Brown says that Constantine then invented a New Testament that would support these views. What was previously a minority movement became the orthodox church, backed by the power of Rome. How much of what Dan Brown suggests is true? After all, though his book is fictional, he claims that the data surrounding it is all factual.

There is a bit of truth to what Brown suggests, but a huge spin has been put on it by Brown – likely for the purposes of selling a controversial book. The multiple pagan and mystery religions existing in the First Century were quick to snap up word about Jesus and combine it into their religions. So you had various groups existing like the Mandaeans, Sabians, Ebionites, Cerinthians, and Docetists.

But one of the most powerful revisions of Christianity, and the one most pertinent to our discussion of *The Da Vinci Code*, was the philosophy known as Gnosticism. Gnosticism was a patchwork of various elements from different systems. It borrowed a lot from Middle Platonism, some from Zoroastrianism, and some from Christianity.

It's important to clear right off the bat that Gnosticism was not a *form* of Christianity. It was

a pagan religion, which, like many others, borrowed from Christianity. Paul's letter to the Colossians is the first sign of orthodox Christianity battling Gnosticism. Later the writing of the apostle John meets this false teaching head-on, as it had begun in some places to masquerade as true Christianity.

Gnosticism was not one centralised religion. There were many different varieties. But let us summarise their main teachings:

- They all taught that the true God is ultimately unknowable, but that this God gives rise to other, lesser gods (called Eons), who in turn give rise to still others. The entire system of gods was called the Pleroma.
- Gnostics also held that the division between matter and spirit corresponds exactly to the division between evil and good, so that matter is always evil, and spirit is always good. Therefore, they all believed that the body is always evil. Only the spirit is good.

The Gnostics' philosophy left them with three questions to answer, because for starters, it brought them a profound problem when dealing with Christ. After all, how could a good God, who is spirit, reside in a body, which to them was evil? So the Gnostics separated Christ from Jesus. They said that Christ was not a human, but that He was a powerful member of the Pleroma. They did not all agree about His relation to the human Jesus.

Some of them (called Docetists) taught that there never was a human Jesus, but that the Christ merely projected the appearance of a human body. Others, called Cerinthian, taught that the Christ came upon the human Jesus at His baptism, and then abandoned Him shortly before the crucifixion. As such, both theories said that Christ could not have been truly human.

The third characteristic of all Gnostics, from where we derive their name, was that they claimed to possess secret knowledge or *gnosis*, that some member of the Pleroma had given them. Christianised Gnostics then made out that Christ had imparted their secret knowledge to them, and in fact had done so through some of his lesser-known disciples, like Thomas, Philip and Mary Magdalene.

In keeping with the secretive motif, they said that the disciples had passed this secret knowledge long through a secret oral tradition, or had written it down in secret documents. Therefore, Gnosticism essentially developed its own set of scriptures, such as the ones we mentioned In Part 1 – the *Gospel of Philip*, the *Gospel of Mary Magdalene*, the *Apocryphon of John*, and the *Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles*. A collection of about fifty Gnostic texts was discovered at the Egyptian town of Nag Hammadi in 1945.

By the end of the first century, there was indeed a conflict between those claiming to follow Christ. On the one side were the Gnostics, claiming to have secret revelations through oral tradition going back to Jesus, and on the other side were the apostles John and Paul who declared they had received their teaching directly from Christ.

Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ.

Colossians 2:8

For many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist.

2 John 1:7

This conflict did take place, and in fact grew, in the Second Century. So we are left to answer the question: who was right? Is it possible to know what Jesus and His first disciples actually taught? Can we know which documents are to be accepted as authentic and authoritative – the Gnostic documents, or the documents contained in our present New Testament?

Actually, these questions were addressed during the heat of the controversy during the Second Century. The answers proposed then were accepted as adequate by most Christians for 1800 years afterwards. To find these answers, we turn to the writings of a man by the name of Irenaeus.

Born in the first part of the Second Century, Irenaeus did not personally know the apostles. He was discipled though by Papias and Polycarp who had themselves been disciples of the apostle John. So, in a sense, he was a grandson in the faith of the apostle John. He was saved at a young age, and went into the ministry. His ministry coincided with the time of the biggest struggle with Gnosticism.

Irenaeus was up against the claims of Gnostics who said they had secret books or 'Gospels' written by such people as Thomas, Philip, Mary Magdalene and even Peter. Without fail, all of these letters and told the story of a Jesus in line with Gnostic teaching, who supported Gnostic beliefs. In contrast to this were the writing of John and Paul, who claimed to preserve the teaching of Jesus, and wrote to expose Gnosticism as a heresy.

Both strands of teaching were claiming to have the true faith. Both were claiming to be apostolic authority. Both claimed it could trace its traditions back to Jesus. So how would it be possible to sort who was right and who was wrong?

On the one hand, it was a debate about true Christian living. Certain Gnostic sects taught rampant immorality and debauchery. But beyond that, it was a debate about authority. Which set of scriptures truly represented Christ? Which traditions stemmed from the true apostles? Who was the real Jesus?

Irenaeus, being a disciple of a disciple of an apostle, certainly had some room to talk about apostolic authority. But he did not rest on his laurels in this way. He instead developed a very convincing answer in five books available to anyone today who wishes to read them. He titled these books *Against Heresies*.

He spends many, many pages refuting the actual doctrine of the Gnostics, explaining the deity and humanity of Christ. But at some point, he begins to deal with the issue of authority. Who is right? What scriptures are to be trusted? In these books, he avoids the dead end of trying to prove that the Gospels which the Gnostics held up as authoritative were in fact spurious. This would be almost impossible to prove one way or another.

Instead, he begins with some very visible evidence. Everybody knew that the apostles like Peter, James, John and Paul had begun certain churches. Well-known churches like the congregations at Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus, Corinth and Rome were examples of apostolic churches.

Irenaeus suggested that the succession of pastors in each of these churches was well-known. Beginning with the apostles, each church could trace the names of its pastors in order. The original pastor of each church had been trained by one or more apostles, and then each pastor had trained his successor. Therefore, each of the apostolic churches had an acknowledged tradition of pastors teaching pastors that reached all the way back to the apostles.

From there, Irenaeus began to examine the doctrine taught in these churches. He pointed out that the doctrine agreed from one of these apostolic churches to another, whereas it disagreed with the teachings of the Gnostics. There was incredible unity in the faith between these churches, which were so widely separated geographically, for there to have been some sort of secret agreement between them. Indeed, each of the churches were founded by different apostles, making the possibility of collusion all the more remote.

From this, he drew a conclusion. The apostles must have believed the same things, for in the relatively short span of 100 years, the churches begun by them were still teaching exactly the same thing. The apostles must have agreed regarding Christ. They then taught the same things to the pastor of the church they had planted. These pastors in turn trained their successor.

The teaching which was then present in those churches was in full harmony with the teachings found in the writings of Paul, John, Peter, James and the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. For Irenaeus, the only possible explanation for such uniformity of teaching was that it had come from the apostles themselves, the very ones who walked and talked with Jesus.

Indeed, Irenaeus used this truth to determine the nature of a supposedly apostolic writing. In short, he said that if a writing claims to be apostolic, but disagrees with a church that has an unbroken line back to the apostles of not much more than 100 years, it is clearly a forgery. An apostle would not write one thing and teach another. Only those writings that reflected the genuine teaching of the apostles as preserved by their churches should be recognised as authoritative Scripture.

From here, Irenaeus pointed out that true churches already knew which writings were genuine. These included nearly all of the 27 books in our current New Testament, and all four of the current Gospels we use today. Irenaeus made a point of saying that only those four Gospels were to be accepted as genuine narratives of the life of Christ.

Irenaeus' writings were devastating to Gnosticism. He overturned their claims of a secret tradition with a very public tradition still visible for all to see. He overturned their claims of secret apostolic writings with very public apostolic writings accepted by apostolic churches. He exposed them not as the true faith, but as imposters, trying to use Christianity as the strength of their mystery pagan religion.

So what then of the claim that Constantine was involved in politically favouring one sect of Christianity? It is simply not true that the Gnostic gospels were suppressed. They were simply never recognized as authoritative. A lack of recognition is not the same as suppression.

The four biblical gospels, as well as Paul's letters, were recognised as sacred and authoritative tradition by A.D. 130, long before Constantine was born. We have the witness

of the Muratorian Canon (a list of Christian books from the late Second Century), which names the four biblical gospels as authoritative in and for the church.

Constantine did not become sole emperor in the West until AD 312, and did not convene the Council of Nicaea until AD 325, shortly after his conquest of the Eastern provinces. Though he presided over the council, there is no reason to believe he shaped its conclusions, which represented the consensus of bishops throughout the entire church. The council's conclusions had nothing to do with the canon but only the divinity of Christ.

The full canon as we now know it was recognized by AD 367. Constantine certainly did not engineer this canonizing process. In fact, at the council of Nicea, Constantine was merely an observer, he did not vote. At that council, the church simply formalised what was already widely held.

The Da Vinci Code also makes the claim that the traditional gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) are not the earliest records of Jesus, and that the gospels of Philip and Mary, as well as some other Gnostic sources, are far earlier. This is false.

There is no evidence that the gospels of Philip and Mary were written prior to the late Second Century AD. That means that the authors were not the biblical Philip and Mary. In contrast, all scholars place the writing of Matthew, Mark, and Luke in the First Century AD – some think as early as a few years after Jesus' death on the cross. Almost all scholars feel that John was also a First Century AD document.

This places the 4 traditional gospels much closer to the time of Jesus than the Gnostic gospels on which Dan Brown relies. Many scholars believe they were written by the actual apostles whose name they bear.

In short, Dan Brown makes very large claims about the followers of Jesus being Gnostics. However, the Gnostics were a late intrusion and were battled by the apostles themselves. It's true that there were multiple religions in the First and Second Centuries, some claiming to be Christian. But to say that the true strand was Gnosticism is simply incorrect.

There is a third assertion that Dan Brown makes in the *The Da Vinci Code*, which is that original Christianity believed in the sacred feminine and that it was only suppressed and wiped out later. It's this assertion we want to look at in Part 3 as we complete our mini-series on *The Da Vinci Code*.