

CRACKING THE DA VINCI CODE
The Gospel Truth: Which Books Belong in the Bible?
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It is halftime. So, let's enter the locker-room, briefly review the first half and then set the strategy for the second half. Today, we are at the mid-point of our series of sermons on *Cracking "The Da Vinci Code."*

Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* has camped atop the *New York Times* bestseller list, and now there are more than eight million copies in print. A follow-up movie, directed by Ron Howard and with a world-class cast, is coming soon.

Reactions to my sermons range from, "It's about time you talked about this book!" . . . to . . . "Why are you spending time talking about this book?" There are two primary reasons for my taking the time to talk about Dan Brown's book. First, lots of folks have read, are reading, and will read this novel. Therefore, I have lots of opportunities to discuss matters of truth, faith, and knowledge. I have struck-up conversations about *The Da Vinci Code* with people who were not inclined to begin a conversation about the Bible. For me, the book provides a point of entry into the important issues of life. Second, we live in a time of war—a war that is waged concerning the nature of truth. Our culture has a hard time distinguishing between honesty and truth. An individual can be completely honest and yet be dead wrong. A person can fall in love with a fascinating subject, giving his or her life to its study, and end up like Leigh Teabing in *The Da Vinci Code*—a deluded seeker after a Grail that is not only elusive but is an illusion. Don Quixote is not the only person who has tilted at windmills.

If there is no ultimate authority when it comes to truth, then people are free to make their own truth. That is what the ancient Gnostics did long ago, and history is repeating itself. The truth is that God has provided a record of his will and his way for humankind—it is called the Bible. And it's the Bible we want to talk about today.

In *The Da Vinci Code*, Leigh Teabing maintains that "the Bible is a product of *man*

. . . not of God” (p. 231). Informing cryptologist Sophie Neveu of how the Bible came to be in the form we have it today, he declares:

“. . . 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.”

“Who chose which gospels to include?” Sophie asked.

“Aha!” Teabing burst in with enthusiasm. “The fundamental irony of Christianity! The Bible, as we know it today, was collated by the pagan Roman emperor Constantine the Great” (p. 231).

The conversation continues between Teabing and Sophie, with Robert Langdon occasionally joining in. Langdon is apparently in agreement with Teabing.

“The twist is this,” Teabing said, talking faster now. “Because Constantine upgraded Jesus’ status almost four centuries *after* Jesus’ death, thousands of documents already existed chronicling His life as a *mortal* man. To rewrite the history books, Constantine knew he would need a bold stroke. From this sprang the most profound moment in Christian history.” Teabing paused, eyeing Sophie. “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.”

. . .

“Fortunately for historians,” Teabing said, “some of the gospels that Constantine attempted to eradicate managed to survive. The Dead Sea Scrolls were found in the 1950s hidden in a cave near Qumran in the Judean desert. And, of course, the Coptic Scrolls in 1945 at Nag Hammadi. . . . The scrolls highlight glaring historical discrepancies and fabrications, clearly confirming that the modern Bible was compiled and edited by men who possessed a political agenda—to promote the divinity of the man Jesus Christ and use His influence to solidify their own power base” (p. 234).

Teabing’s claim that there were “more than *eighty* gospels” considered for the New Testament but that only four were chosen, may be the most misleading statement of supposed “fact” in Dan Brown’s novel. The claim is simply not true. *The Nag Hammadi Library*, published in English in 1977, consisted of forty-five separate titles—of these works only five are named as gospels.¹ The collection of *The Gnostic Scriptures* by Bentley Layton has just short of forty works, three of which bear the title “gospel” and overlap with the Nag Hammadi list. The most generous count of extrabiblical documents appears in Helmut Koester’s *Introduction to the New Testament*. That count stands at sixty, excluding the twenty-seven books in the New Testament. However, a vast majority

¹The gospels named are: *Truth, Thomas, Philip, Egyptians, and Mary*.

of these sixty works were not gospels. Teabing's "fuzzy math" does not add up. His numbers are like the fuzzy figures our current presidential candidates accuse one another of using.

The fact is there were less than twenty documents that might be called Gospels (telling the story of Jesus' life), and of those Teabing and Langdon depend on—the *Gospel of Philip* and the *Gospel of Mary*—there is *no* credible evidence that they existed before or during the time that the New Testament Gospels were written. Furthermore, to suggest that the canonical Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) are not the earliest Gospels but that the earliest Gospels are the suppressed Gnostic Gospels, is historically incorrect. The canonical Gospels come from the last half of the first century A.D., whereas Gnostic thought only came into the spotlight in the middle and later parts of the second century A.D. Regardless of which gospels one chooses to accept as authentic, the fact is that the New Testament Gospels are the earliest gospels and, therefore, the closest in time to the events of the life of Jesus.

We should also note that the claim that the Dead Sea Scrolls along with the Nag Hammadi documents are the earliest Christian records is so false that it's what the British would call a "howler." The Dead Sea Scrolls are purely Jewish documents; there is nothing Christian about them. There is also no evidence any of the Nag Hammadi documents existed before the late second century A.D., with the possible exception of the *Gospel of Thomas*.

And what about the notion that Emperor Constantine suppressed the so-called "earlier" Gnostic Gospels and imposed the canonical Gospels and the doctrine of the divinity of Christ on the church? It is simply not true that the Gnostic Gospels were suppressed during the period when they arose. They were never recognized as authoritative in either the Eastern or Western church. Lack of recognition is not the same as suppression. The four biblical Gospels, as well as Paul's letters, were recognized as sacred and authoritative tradition by A.D. 130, long before Constantine was born. Irenaeus—one of the most important Christian writers of the second century—reports that these four Gospels were circulating together as authoritative sources in the church as early as the first half of the second century A.D. In addition, we also have the witness of the Muratorian Canon—a list of Christian books from the late second century—that

names the four Gospels as authoritative in and for the church.

Constantine did not become sole emperor in the West until 312 and did not convene the Council of Nicaea until 325, shortly after his conquest of the Eastern provinces. Although he presided over the council, there is no reason to believe he shaped its conclusions—conclusions that 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 A.D. 367. Constantine certainly did not engineer this canonizing process, but of course his conversion to Christianity did help the Christian faith to spread.

Throughout my previous sermons and today's lesson, I have used the terms "gnosticism" and "gnostic." In many ways, what is often referred to as New Age religion is nothing more than the revival of ancient Gnosticism. What was Gnosticism?

Gnosticism was an early Greek religious movement that was especially influential in the second-century church. The word *gnosticism* comes from the Greek term *gnōsis*, meaning "knowledge." Gnostics believed that insiders had gained a special kind of spiritual enlightenment, through which they had attained a secret or higher level of knowledge not accessible to the outsider. Gnostics were dualistic; that is, they distinguished between the pure spiritual realm as opposed to the evil material realm. In other words, spirit was good but matter was evil. The God of creation was not the pure God; the pure God was infinitely divorced from the world. Whereas Judaism and Christianity emphasized the role of faith and works in salvation, and the salvation of both body and soul, Gnostics taught that the soul's salvation depended on the individual possessing a unique, inner knowledge of mysteries and secrets—a special in-house teaching given only to the enlightened. In short, salvation is up to us.

For the ancient Gnostic and the modern New-Ager, salvation lies within and not without—it lies within the human being and not in an outside source. Listen carefully to two quotes from the *Gospel of Thomas* and notice how modern they sound!

If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you (45:30-33).

The kingdom is inside you, and outside you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will see that it is you who are the

children of the living father. But if you will not know yourselves, you dwell in poverty, and it is you who are that poverty (3).

Spirituality means understanding who you are and seeking what has already been placed within you. Sound familiar? Look within yourself and you will find that you are all the god that you need! Sound familiar? (Hint: Shirley McClain.)

Now we have come to the heart of the matter as to why I cannot ignore books like *The Da Vinci Code*. Herein lies my most fundamental concern: *an understanding of the nature of truth*. I can shrug off and laugh off most of the historical inaccuracies in Dan Brown's novel because I say to myself, "It's only fiction." But it is more than fiction, judging at least by the way it has captivated millions of readers. What I cannot shrug off or laugh off is a view of truth that is not true.

I do not believe that the truth is within us. If it ever was, and I doubt it, we lost it when we rebelled against God. Our desire to know more resulted in our knowing less. Our desire to have it all resulted in our losing what we had. Our desire to be immortal resulted in our dying. Death is proof that we cannot be our own god. But we keep trying, and we keep dying.

The problem with looking within is that we see what we have become rather than what we were created to be. Our vision is clouded by our inner sin, for we are a distortion of what we once were. When we look within, we do not find truth; rather, we should find an emptiness so great that we realize we must look elsewhere. But we keep looking, and we keep deceiving ourselves.

Truth is from without, not from within. Truth derives from an external source, not from an internal source. We chaff at such a view. Why? Because if truth comes from outside of myself, then I cannot make my own truth. If truth comes from outside of myself, then I must obey, and that's a truth we do not like. So we deny it, and we go on making our own truth not realizing the utter absurdity that everyone's truth cannot possibly be true if there is any such thing as truth.

I do believe that truth is found within a person. I just don't believe that I'm that person. That person is Jesus Christ. Jesus declared, "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. . . . I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 8:32; 14:6). Jesus Christ is the truth of God.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Now that is the truth.

Strange thing about the truth—it is true whether you believe it or not. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

That’s the truth. And I’m willing to bet my soul on it. On what are you betting your soul?

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