

**CRACKING THE DA VINCI CODE**  
**When Did Jesus Become Divine?**  
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Three hundred years after Jesus' crucifixion, the Roman Empire witnessed the first major turning point in the history of Christianity. The violent debate, now known as the Arian Controversy, lasted more than sixty years, dividing the Roman Empire and forever changing the face of the Christian Church.<sup>1</sup> Was Jesus of Nazareth God himself, walking the earth in human form? Or was he a uniquely holy man adopted by God as his Son and raised to divine rank?

The West, with Rome at its heart, was in decline, while the East, a hub of commerce, art, and knowledge, thrived. In the great cities of Alexandria and Antioch, Constantinople and Caesarea, the conflict over Jesus' divinity engaged not only theologians and dozens of ecumenical councils, including the famous Council of Nicaea, but also engaged the masses of people who were prepared to take their fight to the streets.

The protagonists were Arius, a learned and eloquent priest, and Athanasius, a brilliant and dedicated, yet violent, bishop. Arius argued that Jesus was less than God and that his true role was to serve as a model of virtue for all humanity. Athanasius thought this was heresy and an assault on Jesus himself. Between these formidable adversaries stood Constantine the Great, Rome's first Christian emperor.

When did Jesus become divine? That is the question we will seek to answer in today's sermon as we continue our study of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*.

According to Dan Brown's book, in the early church and in the earliest historical documents Jesus is a great man and prophet, but he was later proclaimed divine at the Council of Nicaea. Leigh Teabing—a British, religious historian and the primary theologian in *The Da Vinci Code*—makes a series of assertions about the development of

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<sup>1</sup>See Richard E. Rubenstein, *When Jesus Became God: The Epic Fight over Christ's Divinity in the*

Christianity on pages 230-236 of the novel. If the discussion about the Gnostic gospels is the most problematic of Teabing's claims, then his treatment of Constantine and Nicaea is a close second. Teabing argues as follows:

. . . “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. . . . 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. . . . 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).

At this point, Robert Langdon—a professor of religious symbols from Harvard—makes a reply about the sincerity of belief on the part of the Church before Teabing goes on to say that “almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is *false*” (p. 235).

According to Teabing, Constantine and the Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325 are responsible for collating the Bible and declaring Jesus’ divinity. Teabing states:

. . . “Until *that* moment in history [Council of Nicaea, 325 A.D.], Jesus was viewed by His followers as a mortal prophet . . . a great and powerful man, but a *man* nonetheless. . . . Jesus’ establishment as ‘the Son of God’ was officially proposed and voted on by the Council of Nicaea. . . . A relatively close vote at that. . . . Establishing Christ’s divinity was critical to the further unification of the Roman empire and to the new Vatican power base. . . . It was all about power . . . Christ as Messiah was critical to the functioning of Church and state. Many scholars claim that the early Church literally *stole* Jesus from His original followers, hijacking His human message, shrouding it in an impenetrable cloak of divinity, and using it to expand their own power. . . .” (p. 233).

To summarize, Teabing claims that Constantine and the Council of Nicaea ignored the majority of early Christian documents and gave Jesus a greater status than he previously had possessed. *Bottom line: Christianity as we know it is really a creation of the fourth century, not the first century.*

So, exactly what did happen at the Council of Nicaea? Inquiring minds need to know. Is it true that Constantine sought to unify the whole empire under one religious banner? *No*. Constantine ruled as the Roman Emperor from about A.D. 313 to 337. He did not take full control of the empire before 324, or very shortly before the Council of

Nicaea. This fact alone should show that most theological issues, including those about Jesus' divinity, had taken a rather definite shape before Constantine had anything to do with them.

It is open to debate to what degree Constantine himself became a Christian. Certainly, Constantine showed some favoritism toward the Christian faith after it had experienced persecutions under Diocletian and other emperors, but it is clear that he also continued to honor various pagan gods and customs throughout most of his life, even confirming the privileges of certain pagan priests shortly before he died. Constantine took a pluralistic approach to the empire's religions but was wise enough to see that Christianity had a bright future. Seeing the rising tide of Christianity, Constantine was smart enough to include it among the approved and even favored religions of his empire. Taking the evidence we have, it simply won't allow us to believe that a person like Constantine would have imposed Christianity on the entire empire.

Our interest in Constantine comes chiefly from the fact that he seems to have presided at the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D., and he also seems to have aided various bishops in two disputes about Christ—Donatism and Arianism. (We began this lesson by briefly looking at the Arian controversy.) At the Council of Nicaea, Constantine seems to have favored Jesus' true divinity, but he was not a theologian, and he certainly was not the one who wrote the Nicene Creed. Furthermore, it cannot be claimed that he determined the canon—the books accepted as Scripture. For the most part, Constantine merely pronounced the benediction on the deliberations that had already been formulated.

Is it true, as *The Da Vinci Code* asserts, that Jesus was not affirmed to be Son of God or divine before the Council of Nicaea? *Absolutely not.* Such views of Christ had been held among Christians for the better part of three hundred years before the Council of Nicaea.

Is it true that there was a close vote on the divinity of Jesus at Nicaea? *No.* The issue at Nicaea was how the divine Son and Father were interrelated and whether they shared the same divine substance. No one at the council was contending that Jesus was a mere mortal or just a prophet, as Leigh Teabing claims. Rather, the dispute was over whether Jesus had a divine substance *like* the Father's or whether he shared the *same* divine substance with the Father. The debate was certainly not about whether Jesus was divine

at all, nor was a vote taken about such a matter. The question was, In what sense was Jesus divine?

Constantine simply endorsed what the bishops he was working with had long affirmed and what many Christians had believed for centuries. To see the Church's elevated view of Jesus as being a result of power politics is a total distortion of the historical evidence.

Jesus is called "God" (*theos*) some seven times in the New Testament, including in the Gospel of John, and he is called "Lord" (*kyrios*) in the divine sense numerous times as well. No historian that I am aware of argues that these New Testament texts come after the Council of Nicaea. The documents written in the first century about Jesus and his movement suggest he was the divine Son of God. The Council of Nicaea in the fourth century and the Council of Chalcedon in the fifth century only formalized these beliefs in creeds and attempted to clarify (1) the relationship of Christ to God the Father and (2) the relationship of Christ's human and divine natures. These were not ideas conjured up by either of these councils.

So, *what* did the first Christians believe and *when* did they believe it? For an answer, we turn to the earliest and most reliable first-century documents: the New Testament.

The Apostle Paul penned these words around 62 A.D.:

Who [Christ Jesus], being in very nature God,  
did not consider equality with God something  
to be used to his own advantage;  
rather he made himself nothing  
by taking the very nature of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.  
And being found in appearance as a human being,  
he humbled himself  
by becoming obedient to death—  
even death on a cross!  
Therefore God exalted him to the highest place  
and gave him the name [Lord—v. 11] 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 acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:9-11, TNIV).

Without embarrassment, Paul applied to Jesus language that the prophet Isaiah applied to

God in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>2</sup> Jesus is placed in the same position as God. Jesus receives worship as God does. This is but one example among many from the writings of Paul.

Written probably before A.D. 70, the Book of Hebrews begins with these words:

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs (1:1-4, TNIV).

Jesus is not a mere prophet; he is "the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of God's being." He shares equal glory and honor with God the Father.

A final example, from the Gospel of John, written at the latest in the last decade of the first century:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. . . . The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth (1:1-5, 14, TNIV).

*Bottom line: The belief that Jesus Christ was God in the flesh was widespread among Christians almost three full centuries before the Council of Nicaea. Jesus did not become divine; he always was divine!*

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<sup>2</sup>Isaiah cites God as speaking: "By myself I have sworn, from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness a word that shall not return: 'To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear'" (45:23, NRSV).