

A four part series:
Why the Da Vinci Code is True!
(and today's Christianity is dysfunctional)
Part 1 of 4

The Cover-up of the First Christianities: What did we lose?

Given June 4, 2006 at Broadway Church in Kansas City.

(The words appearing in bold were projected with Power Point onto the front of the sanctuary.)

This morning and for the rest of this month we are talking about the DaVinci Code. How many read the book? Seen movie? Both? How many don't care? (hands up on all of these)

It's fascinating to me because it's a cultural phenomenon! This book has sold more than 60 million copies, more than any other book next to the Bible. It has been translated into 44 languages. *Time* magazine named Dan Brown one of *The World's 100 Most Influential People*. And now the movie is breaking records. As David Letterman said, "The Da Vince Code in its first weekend made \$77 million. It finished just behind a gas station in Queens."

The Da Vinci Code movie has been banned in some countries. Thailand ordered the distributor to eliminate the final 10 minutes of the movie or it would be banned. The national censor in the largely Catholic Philippines gave the film an "adults only" certificate, banning under-18's from viewing it. A church spokesperson told reporters that the film required "mature discernment" because of a plot that involves Jesus Christ having a child with Mary Magdalene.

There have been many, many protests in this country, all from the Christian community. The cover of this month's *Christianity Today* was "Da Vinci Fever – How to fight the infection." There are at least 20 books out now that attack Brown's faulty facts.

So what's the story, if you haven't read or seen it? Here it is in one minute: The story begins with the murder of the Louvre's museum curator. But this curator isn't just interested in art; he's also the Grand Master of a secret society called the Priory of Sion. The Priory guards a secret that, if revealed, would discredit today's version of Christianity. Before dying, the curator attempts to pass on the secret to his granddaughter Sophie, a cryptographer, and Harvard professor of symbology, Robert Langdon, by leaving a number of clues that he hopes will guide them to the truth.

What's the big secret? It is the location and identity of the Holy Grail. But in Brown's novel, the Grail is not the cup allegedly used by Christ at the Last Supper. It's Mary Magdalene, who he says is the wife of Jesus, who carried on the royal bloodline of Christ by giving birth to his child! The Priory of Sion guards the secret location of Mary's tomb and serves to protect the bloodline of Jesus that has continued to this day!

There is nothing new here. Brown has just made popular what good scholars and bad conspiracy theorists have been discussing for a long time: lost gospels, alternative Christianities, Jesus' sexuality, historical revisionists, and cover-ups. They have just never had such a public airing.

Why the appeal? There are lots of good murder mysteries around but none has achieved such popularity. I believe it appeals to our suspicion that things are not what they seem in the current version of Christian history. Brown appeals to universal archetypes and longings - the power of the sacred feminine which religious leaders have suppressed, the importance of Jesus as a person and as a symbol, the widespread suspicion that people in charge have rewritten history and covered up other viewpoints.

Dan Brown is on to something in the Da Vinci Code even though he gets many of the historical facts wrong. Dan Brown identifies himself as a Christian and he may have done more to open people to explore and talk about the origins of Christianity and the deeper truths of the Jesus path than almost anyone else today.

The critics point out the many historical inaccuracies in the book. Constantine and the Council of Nicea in 325 CE did not debate Jesus' divinity as Brown states. They only debated how Jesus was divine. And his council didn't talk about what should be in the Bible at all, yet Brown says they decided which books would be in the Bible.

But there's an elephant in the room. What the critics will not deal with is real fact that there has been a cover-up, and it has greatly affected how we view and practice Christianity today.

It's like Jesus telling the story of the prodigal son. The critics come along and say that it really wasn't a prodigal son but a prodigal daughter. It wasn't a fatted calf, it was a lamb that was prepared for the feast. Or they could ask if that story really happened exactly that way. They could claim that Jesus got the facts wrong, or made up a story. But the real point is not did the story actually happen with the details that Jesus gave. Who cares! The point is that the story is true, really, really true. There is a loving Other, like a loving parent, who's greater than we are, who loves us, welcomes us, and is incredibly interested in our lives and spiritual progress. The story Jesus told is true, whether it happened with those particular facts or not. And that's what I'm calling this series"

**Why the Da Vinci Code is TRUE!
(and today's Christianity is dysfunctional)**

I'm going to talk about the four cover-ups the Da Vince Code brings to light these four Sundays and we begin this morning with:

The cover-up of the First Christianities. What did we lose?

I have been taught all my life in church and then seminary that there was only one original true Christianity . It went straight back to the apostles and then to Jesus. Of course there were heretics but they were easily dismissed. There was only one true Christian tree and it goes down into the ground straight back to Jesus and the apostles. And Christianity as we now know it is the one true religion. As Mark Twain said, "Human beings are the only ones with the One True Religion, several of them."

One of the religious ideas of the book is that there were other versions of Christianity from the very first. Brown got the facts wrong, for instance, by saying those other versions didn't think Jesus was divine. Most of the early Christians did believe he was divine, they just had different ideas about

how he was divine. But Brown was dead on right about there being other versions of Christianity from the very beginning. He got there with a few facts and a lot of fiction. I'm going to get there with the most recent and best historical scholarship. If you want to understand early Christianity and how we got to today's Christianity I will tell you in ten minutes.

A Brief History of the First Hundred and Fifty Years of Christianity

I want to describe a few of the very first Christian groups. There were many varieties of authentic, sincere followers of Jesus from the very first, and I want you to get a sense and feel for a few of these original Christian groups.

The Ebionites

The Ebionites were probably the first primitive (in our view) Christians. They believed in one God just like the Jews. They saw Jesus as just a man, not God. But God adopted him to be the Messiah. The earliest Greek manuscript of Luke that we have has God saying at Jesus' baptism, "You are my son, today I have begotten you." (Luke 3:22 footnote, also Psalms 2:7)

Their Bible consisted of the what we would call the Old Testament plus the gospel of Matthew which is the most Jewish of the four Gospels. The Ebionites believed a Jewish God sent a Jewish Jesus to Jews to fulfill Jewish scripture. After all, Jesus was born a Jew, lived as a Jew, died as a Jew, and rose again as a Jew! They were the original Jews for Jesus. They kept all the Jewish laws and believed Christians needed to become Jews. They hung around for centuries despite Paul's attacks on them, showing how flexible Christianity was at first. They hated Paul and considered him a heretic. If they would have won out, we'd all be Jews or more likely Christianity would be a version of Judaism and not be very widespread. But remember, these Ebionites were authentic, sincere followers of Jesus doing the best they could to understand what Jesus wanted them to do.

The Marcionites

On the other hand, the Marcionites saw a real problem with the Old Testament. The Old Testament view of God was a god of violent vengefulness plus a little bit of love. Jesus came teaching about a God who is only love and who loved his enemies. I saw two T-shirts the other day that were straight from the Marcionites. "Who would Jesus bomb?" and "How would Jesus torture?" The Marcionites saw such a difference between the Old Testament and Jesus that they concluded the God of the Old Testament was a different God than the One to whom Jesus related. (They were on to a real truth about God but a wrong conclusion.) So they believed in two Gods, one bad and one good.

They saw Jesus as totally God in person and not a man or human at all. He just appeared to be human. Their founder, Marcion, was the first leader to draw up a list of what documents he thought Christians should consider their sacred Scriptures. In a sense, it was his first that we should have a "New Testament." Remember that Jesus nor anyone else in the New Testament said that we should have such a collection. Marcion's Bible did not have the Old Testament in it but consisted of a version of the Gospel of Luke which had any Jewish ideas eliminated and ten letters of Paul who was their hero. They wanted nothing to do with Judaism. They were sincere, authentic followers of Jesus who flourished widely. In the Far East, beyond reach of Rome, they flourished for centuries. If they would have dominated Christianity our Bible would be a lot smaller. I think they were more evolved than the Ebionites, but both existed side by side in the first 150 years.

The Gnostics

“Gnosis” is a Greek word for knowledge or knowing, but it means an experiential knowing, not just knowing facts. When we read in the gospel of John, “You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free,” the word for “know” is gnosis.

As the Gnostics use the term, we could translate it as “insight” for gnosis involves an intuitive process of knowing oneself. ... and to know oneself, at the deepest level, is simultaneously to know God. Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*

The Gnostics, of which there were many varieties, saw that the world was a such a difficult and bad place that they did not believe the good God Jesus talked about could have created it. So they decided that the original good God created another God who was not quite as good. Then that God created another God who was a little bit worse, until finally you got down to a God who was bad enough to have created this evil world. A flawed God created flawed world. So the Gnostics believed in many, many Gods.

They saw Jesus as two separate beings, one God, one human. Since the original highest and best God would not have anything to do evil human flesh, Jesus has to be two beings. The human died on the cross while the God being of Jesus watched.

Their Bible, that is the books they would have considered sacred, would have been some of what we call the Gnostics Gospels and writings. They would also have used all the other gospels and writings floating around because they were very open to many things and interpreted other writings such as the Old Testament in a metaphorical way that let them see a deeper meaning. They believed these other, lesser ways were needed but their way was the highest and only for a few. Gnostics would probably not go to Gnostic church but rather a study group. Lots of Christians in other groups would also go to Gnostic group – probably secretly. They were the New Agers of the first few centuries. Gnostics had their wild stories that seemed mythical because they were, but they also seemed to know that. New Agers today might benefit by not talking their own metaphysical stories so literally. Many New Agers today do feel much at home with Gnostic writings.

The Gnostics emphasized the divinity within each person and the inner path to become aware of it. They were democratic and totally rejected the emerging system of priests and bishops. They valued women in leadership. They were a more evolved group in some ways that the Marcionites, and I believe God used them for deeper understandings just like God uses New Agers today – and mixed with some craziness. Some would say I am a Gnostic Christian, although I don’t believed a flawed God created a flawed world. I believe this is just the right world for us to learn what we came to earth to learn. The Gnostics were authentic followers of Jesus

The Thomascines

The Thomascines saw themselves as followers of the apostle Thomas and his disciples. They believed in one God and believed Jesus was a real man who was divine. Except they believed he was divine just like everyone else. The difference between us and Jesus was that Jesus knew he was divine and we don’t. So Jesus was able to express his divinity in an amazingly advanced way. Jesus was different from us only in his degree of evolution, but not in the kind of being that he was. He was a fully evolved divine human being.

In addition to the Gospel of Thomas, the scriptures of the Thomascines most likely included Matthew Mark, Luke and John and other writings. We are going to look at The Gospel of Thomas and others so called lost gospels in detail next week.

They believed that Jesus taught us to rediscover our own divinity by going within. My favorite saying of last month is:

Those who do not go within go without

Many of us here at Broadway would be at home with the Thomascines.

Now, what about the version of Christianity which, for want of a better word, we will call:

Orthodoxy.

These are the Christians who believed God was Trinity, three in one – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They saw Jesus as fully human and fully divine. Their Bible was the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments as we know them today. Before the Reformation this group might be characterized as the church with the true bishops in charge. The true church was determined from the false church not by the love and spiritual understanding of its membership but by the church's leaders being connected in a direct line from the apostles. The bishops must be able to trace their ordination straight back to the original twelve apostles. (Good luck with that). It was the right bishops that made it the true church.

Where was this version of early Christianity? It wasn't anywhere! It didn't exist in the first hundred and fifty years of Christianity! It hadn't been thought of yet! There were groups that were beginning to think about parts of this. And some groups were heading this way in doctrine. But it did not exist as a distinguishable group for the first hundred and fifty years of Christianity. No one group believed even these three things about God, Jesus, and the Bible. It took the next two hundred years to get the Trinity straightened out. The sixty-six books of the Bible as we know it were not collected in its current form for another three hundred years – and we are still arguing. The Catholics add the Apocrypha and Luther put James, Hebrews, Jude and Revelation in an appendix!

So let's put this group into the future another two or three hundred years. We will call it 4th century Orthodoxy. Now just look at the diversity of all of these groups!

Can you see yourself back then getting up on Sunday morning (Saturday for the Ebionites), and trying to decide which church to go to. Shall I go to a one-god church, a two-god church, a many-god church, or one of those new-fangled three in one god churches that some people are beginning to talk about.

At the gathering of Christians when they said, "Take out your Bibles please," you might pick up the Old Testament plus Mathew; or no Old Testament at all but Luke plus ten of Paul's letters; or a bunch of gospels like Mary, Judas, Phillip, the Gospel of Truth, and the Three Tablets of Seth; or you would pick up the Gospel of Thomas, plus some of the Old Testament and New Testament books that we would recognize that were floating around;

But nowhere for the next three hundred years would they pick up our Bible!

Original Christianity was not one single tree going straight down grounded in Jesus and apostles. Original Christianity was more like a grove of trees. There were many trees all tracing themselves to Jesus and his first followers.

The most important “discovery” of modern times has been that early Christianity was extremely diverse – far more diverse than previous scholars ever could have imagined.
Bart Ehrman

How did we get to the Christianity of today? Bishops, male church leaders began assuming more and more power over their churches. The bishop in wealthy and prosperous Rome, assumed more and more power over Christian groups in other areas. By late 300's most of these other Christianities had disappeared and only one version was left – the imperial Roman version affirmed by Constantine. Constantine needed a single version of Christianity in order to bring unity to Rome. The alternative gospels and writings were already being burned and banned by time of Constantine. So orthodoxy won out in the fourth century. And the winners did what winners always do.

The winners always write the history – and then even rewrite what's already been written.

Only recently have we actually heard voices of losers outside of the critic's interpretations. What did we lose in the rewriting of church history? We have lost the truth of the evolution of Christian spirituality from the very beginning by buying into the false idea that Christianity was crystallized into one, and only one, right expression from the very first.

Yet we all know that:

Truth must be revealed slowly or else it will dazzle and blind us.

- Christianity evolved from Judaism.
- Jesus himself evolved by growing in wisdom and stature (Luke 2:39).
- Early Christianity was evolving from its very beginnings.
- Today's orthodoxy itself evolved from early Christianity.
- Christianity is still evolving.

- Don't be afraid of evolution.
 - Evolution is the way the Spirit works.
 - Embrace your own evolution!

Have you changed your way of believing and experiencing the spiritual path over the past ten years. If not how come? If you have, then celebrate the Spirit's evolving work in you.

Jesus himself taught that following him would be an evolutionary process which would continue to evolve even today:

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. The Spirit of truth will guide you into all the truth. John 16:12

Did we think he meant he had things to say to us that wouldn't make much of a difference? NO! They were and are very important things for our spiritual evolution.

I close with the words of that famous theologian of the last generation, Gracie Allen:

“Never place a period where God has placed a comma.”

Christianities of the First 150 Years - plus 4th century Orthodoxy

EBIONITES	MARCIONITES	GNOSTICS	THOMASCINES	ORTHODOXY (4thc.)
GOD: One God	Two Gods	Many Gods	One God	God Three in one
JESUS: Human only	God only	Two beings	Divine, like all	Man/God
BiBLE: OT & Matt.	Luke/10 Paul	Gnostic Gospels	Thomas plus	Today's 66
<i>Everything Jewish</i>	<i>Nothing Jewish</i>	<i>Inner over outer</i>	<i>Jesus teaches us to rediscover our divinity by going within</i>	<i>Bishops in charge</i>