

## Reinventing Jesus

A couple of odd things happened to me in the past week. First, on Friday, a Jewish co-worker of mine, who rarely wants to discuss spiritual matters, told me I should read The Da Vinci Code, implying that it would give me the truth about Jesus. I debated a bit, of course, but there wasn't much point.

Second, I was in the little shop in the Wilmington train station Monday, looking for a new puzzle magazine when I spotted this week's Time magazine with a Anthony van Dyck's *The Savior of the World* (Jesus, in case you have any doubt) on the cover. The headline on the cover was "The Lost Gospels: Early texts that never made it into the Bible are suddenly popular. What do they tell us about Christianity today?" Then I thought I was seeing double—there was U.S. News and World Report graced with the **same** painting. Its headline was "The Jesus Code: America is rethinking the Messiah—again." I looked for Newsweek, knowing this kind of synchronicity is rarely coincidental, but it wasn't there.

Today, I found a copy and at first I thought Newsweek must not have gotten the memo since its cover was not Jesus and there was no article about The Da Vinci Code. But then I realized that Newsweek had scored a major coup on their competitors, having gone to press with the Saddam Hussein capture story. I'll bet there were some pained expressions in the corporate offices at Time and U.S. News when they saw that! I suspect Newsweek will slide an article into the next edition.

But that's not the point of this special edition of *Ekklesia Then & Now*. I read the articles in Time and U.S. News and felt compelled to respond.

### Then

Any belief that the church of the New Testament was a totally homogenous group holding to a completely common set of principles is unsupportable on a careful reading of Scripture. There are many instances of disagreement among believers. One of the most notable is Paul's self-described confrontation with Peter over the issue of eating with Gentiles (see Galatians 2:11-14). Many of Paul's letters give commands or advice in obvious response to believers who disagreed. But without question, the Apostles and their followers held firmly to the common foundation of the nature of Jesus as fully human and fully divine, having died for the forgiveness of sins and risen again.

Being who we are, however, it wasn't long before people who had difficulty accepting the truth began to invent alternate versions of the Gospel. I wrote

about the primary alternatives in [Ekklesia Then & Now 2.4 \(False Doctrine\)](#) so I will not go into great detail here, but it came down to human inventions that (1) changed the nature of Grace by reverting to the comfort of legalism, (2) changed the nature of Christ by suggesting that He only **seemed** to die on the cross (docetism), or (3) changed the nature of God by claiming that the world had been created by a malign lesser god (dualism). Both docetism and dualism found a home in Gnosticism, a religion that stood as a primary competitor to Christianity in the second century.

Gnosticism (from the Greek word *gnosis*, knowledge) did not arise out of Christianity but out of a syncretistic mixture of Greek and Jewish thought. The seeds of Gnosticism can be found in first century B.C. Jewish thought. Fundamentally, Gnosticism sought to explain evil and suffering by suggesting that flesh and spirit were fundamentally incompatible. Hence, to the Gnostic, the material world could not have been created by genuine, good God. Out of this idea came asceticism and self-mutilation in an attempt to destroy or at least tame the flesh. But it also bore licentiousness based on the self-serving argument that nothing done in the flesh could have any bearing on the spirit. Both of these ideas, while not yet fully birthed in the first century, were rejected by the apostolic writers.

Some have assumed Gnosticism to be an alternative form of Christianity but in fact it was another religion altogether—one that borrowed Jesus but reinvented Him to serve its own purposes. Jesus became not the Christ, but a good man. And the Christ, who resided in Jesus from His baptism until the Cross, became the repository of secret knowledge that would permit people to find God within themselves. Gnosticism largely ran its course by the end of the second century, although remnants have surfaced from time to time. Gnosticism was not destroyed by the post-Constantine institutional church.

One spur of Gnosticism that flourished in the latter second century was Marcionism. Marcion, its founder and a wealthy ship owner from Sinope on the Black Sea, completely rejected the Old Testament, viewing it as incompatible with the “gospel of love.” Marcion, like other since, formulated his own version of the Scriptures consisting of only an edited version of Luke and Paul’s letters, excepting the pastorals. Marcionism outlived its founder, but not by much, and was soon absorbed by Manichaeism, an eastern ascetic philosophy that considered Buddha, Jesus, and Mani (its founder) co-equal prophets sent to retrieve stolen particles of light from the souls of men. Unlike other Gnostic expressions, Marcionism did indeed grow out of Christianity. Marcion’s father was a bishop and eventually ex-communicated his son for his heretical views.

Religions like Gnosticism and Marcionism died out because the answers they provided did nothing to instill a genuine sense of hope in their adherents. But their decaying corpses have been exhumed from time to time ever since, and in 1945, the discovering of a trove of Gnosticism texts near the Egyptian town of Nag Hammadi began a small resuscitation that continues to grow under the concerted efforts of a small circle of liberal theologians.

The articles in Time and U.S. News were inspired primarily by the remarkable success of Dan Brown's The Da Vinci Code. Brown, scratching the surface of the apocryphal Gnostic writings, presents a marriage of Jesus to Mary Magdalene (and her designation as His successor) as an historical fact and weaves a modern thriller around the heavy hand of the Roman Catholic Church. Brown's novel would represent no threat to Christianity if it weren't for the combined influence of scholarly liberalism and ecclesiastical corruption. Besieged by the glut of clerical abuses and misguided evangelical legalism, Americans are open to just about any new ideas about Jesus. It is reminiscent of Luke's parenthetical remark about Athenians: "Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new." (Acts 17:21)

Brown is not the real culprit in this latest assault on the nature of Jesus, but he'll undoubtedly be the target of visceral sermons from some quarters. The real threat to The Way, to use the more ancient term (see [ET&N 5.4, The Path of Life](#)), lies in the scholarly attempts to rob the Gospel of divine influence. Most of the current assault comes from "The Jesus Seminar," an in-bred group of scholars from liberal theological universities who set out under the leadership of founder Robert W. Funk to decide first "What did Jesus really say?," the subtitle of the group's 1997 publication.

The main title of that book is "The Five Gospels," which includes the *Gospel of Thomas* on at least a par with the canonical Gospels. The 70 or so "Fellows" of the Jesus Seminar voted on each of Jesus' sayings, inserting a colored marble in a bag designating his or her (the Seminar is dominated by men) opinion. The colors were assigned these meanings and point values:

Red = "Jesus undoubtedly said this or something very like it." (3 points)

Pink = "Jesus probably said something like this." (2)

Gray = "Jesus did not say this, but the ideas contained in it are close to his own." (1)

Black = "Jesus did not say this; it represents the perspective or content of a later or different tradition." (0)

To determine an overall score, all individual votes were averaged so just as any student knows that a single F messes up a bunch of A's and B's, a small number of skeptics in the Jesus Seminar have a disproportionate effect! The overall scores were converted to percentages, and Jesus' sayings in their new "Scholar's Translation" of the Gospels color-coded Jesus' words based on 75-100% red, 50-74% pink, 25-50% gray, and 0-25% black. Taking one hypothetical vote from 10 individuals, if five were to assign a red marble, three a pink marble, and one each gray and black, the total Jesus Seminar score would be 73%. The saying would be rendered pink in "The Five Gospels."

In my opinion, that's presumptuous enough—that a group of intellectuals operating 2000 years after the fact can determine what Jesus "really" said—

but it's the results that are most telling. Guess which Gospels ended up with the most and fewest red-letter sayings. Answer at the end of this article. They did basically the same things with what Jesus did in the 1998 [Acts of Jesus: What Did Jesus Really Do?](#)

Some of the Fellows of the Jesus Seminar, particularly John Dominic Crossan, Robert Funk, and Marcus Borg have been prolific writers, producing numerous books about Jesus and the early church. Here are some of the titles:

**The Historical Jesus : The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant (Crossan)**

**Jesus : A Revolutionary Biography (Crossan)**

**The Gospel of Thomas: Unearthing the Lost Words of Jesus (Crossan)**

**The Essential Jesus: Original Sayings and Earliest Images (Crossan)**

**Honest to Jesus : Jesus for a New Millennium (Funk)**

**The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith (Borg)**

**The God We Never Knew : Beyond Dogmatic Religion To A More Authentic Contemporary Faith (Borg)**

**Jesus and Buddha: The Parallel Sayings (Borg)**

Now consider the implications of some of these titles—orthodoxy doesn't have the essential Jesus, we never knew God, we've been dishonest to God, orthodoxy is neither authentic nor contemporary, etc. Add to these the works of people like Elaine Pagels (e.g., [Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas](#)) and John Shelby Spong (e.g., [Why Christianity Must Change or Die, Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism](#)) and you begin to see the nature and extent of the attack. It was these kinds of books that served as the basis for Dan Brown's premises in [The Da Vinci Code](#).

Drop into a Border's or a Barnes & Noble sometime and you'll see these titles alongside Billy Graham, C.S. Lewis, Max Lucado and others.

Now comes a new book, [Lost Christianities: The Battle for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew](#) by Bart Ehrman, who is extensively quoted in the [Time](#) article. The premise of the title is shaky to start with because, as I indicated in the "Then" section, much of Gnostic thought pre-dated Christianity and only borrowed a revised Jesus. To suggest that these are legitimate alternative Christianities (as if there's more than one) is inaccurate. That is not to say that individual expression of Christian faith must always take one form, as some institutional churches suggest, but much of what is found in the so-called "lost gospels" goes far beyond expression and strikes at the core of God's plan for humanity.

The [Time](#) and [U.S. News](#) articles were surprising balanced. I had expected more orthodoxy-bashing. But their very balance is the crux of the issue. Neo-Gnostic, New Age beliefs are given equality with the unvarnished Word of God. The basic premise of this Gnostic Christianity is expressed by a quote from Elaine Pagel's [Beyond Belief](#): "(Thomas) encourages the hearer not so much to believe in Jesus, as to [try] to know God through one's own divinely given capacity." If that's so, who needs Jesus?

Furthermore, a number of other quotes reveal the basic problem: "looking for another way of being Christian" (outside the church), "my picture of Jesus is more plausible now" (after studying *Thomas*), "more plausible" (that Jesus married Mary Magdalene than that He rose from the dead), "feels right," "makes sense," "my own faith and my own ideas."

All of these pre-suppose a human ability to figure out the divine through our own (secret?) wisdom.

Paul wrote about this kind of presumption: *"For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men."* (1 Corinthians 1:22-25) God's word doesn't have to be plausible, to make sense, or to feel right by human standards.

More importantly, he may have prophesized about our era: *"For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths."* (2 Timothy 4:3-4 NIV)

Dan Brown's [The Da Vinci Code](#) and its premises are myths, the secret wisdom of much of the *Gospel of Thomas* is a myth, but most importantly, the New Age notion that a Holy, Almighty God is directly accessible by Man's own devices without the intervention of a Savior is a destructive myth.

*"But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. Many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned; and in their greed they will exploit you with false words; their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep"* (2 Peter 2:1-3).

*"These are springs without water and mists driven by a storm, for whom the black darkness has been reserved. For speaking out arrogant words of vanity they entice by fleshly desires, by sensuality, those who barely escape from the ones who live in error, promising them freedom while they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved"* (2 Peter 2:17-19).

Peter's image of "springs without water" is particularly profound when one considers these human-bound efforts to "experience God." A thirsty person, approaching the promise of cool, fresh water from a spring, will not only be disappointed by its emptiness, but may also be embittered and cynical when another spring appears, even though that one really has water.

The author of the [U.S. News](#) article insists that "there is no way to return to the original Jesus." I find the implied premise of that statement false

because we don't need to return. Jesus never left us and never will. There is no doubt that much about the institutional church makes it difficult to find Him among a litany of creeds, rules, regulations, hierarchies, rites, and rituals. Elaine Pagels, for example, according to the [Time](#) article "'moved away' from a youthful Evangelicalism she calls 'very exclusive and hostile.'"

But Jesus is still there, "the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8), waiting for each of us to turn to Him so He can introduce us to the Father! But make no mistake, He is the only way.

ANSWER: In [The Five Gospels](#), the Jesus Seminar rated the highest number of Jesus' sayings red in the *Gospel of Thomas* and the fewest in the *Gospel of John*.

Unsure about or don't agree with something in *Ekklesia Then & Now?* First, be a Berean (Acts 17:10-11). If you still disagree, post a message so we can all share in the discussion!



## **NEXT ISSUE: Cities of the Ekklesia: Corinth (January 6)**

To gain a greater understanding of the New Testament, particularly the letters distributed in the early church and now found in the Bible, it is valuable to understand the culture of the original intended recipients. This issue will be the first in a series (not consecutive) on the cities of the New Testament, where the ekklesia lived and worked. Of all those cities, I find Corinth the most interesting and the most relevant to modern America.

© Richard M. Soule, 2003 Unlimited copy and distribution permission is hereby granted on the condition that this copyright notice is included. Website: [www.peculiarpress.com](http://www.peculiarpress.com)

Unless otherwise noted, all biblical citations are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB)