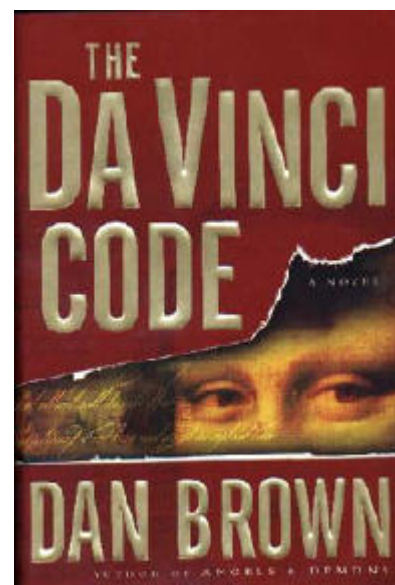


# What Happened at Nicaea

*The identity of Jesus of Nazareth is central to the beliefs of Christianity. Christianity does not call a person to join a philosophy, or a set of practices. Sure, there are philosophical ideas and practices that are consistent with Christianity. However, the central part of the Christian faith is a call to be in a relationship with Christ Jesus. Christian apologist Michael Ramsden once remarked, "Without Christ the Christian is left with the letters I A N and Ian cannot help you." While this is simplistic, saying it does convey the importance of Jesus to the Christian religion. This is exactly the question that many bishops were called to answer in the city of Nicaea in A.D. 325.*

Some skeptics claim that no one claimed that Jesus was not seen as divine until the council of Nicaea. In 2003 this view was popularized in Dan Brown's novel, *The Da Vinci Code* and in the movie that followed. In this novel Brown uses a fictional story to make factual claims about the origin of Christianity and the person of Jesus. While investigating a murder, several of Brown's characters make some disturbing discoveries. One character states, "Jesus was viewed by His followers as a mortal prophet...A great and powerful man, but a *man* nonetheless." [\[1\]](#) Another character says that "Constantine upgraded Jesus' status almost four centuries after Jesus' death." [\[2\]](#) While most of Brown's claims have been disregarded, the claim that the divinity of Jesus was something invented is still floating around. So it is still important to understand what happened at the Council of Nicaea.



One interpretation of the Council of Nicaea is that it was a "local dispute...eventually judged by the ecumenical

councils.”{3} The result is that the issue of this local dispute was influenced by cultural issues that was then imposed on all Christians by an ecumenical council. An examination of the facts reveals that this interpretation is the result of imposing philosophical presuppositions onto the historical narrative instead of looking at the facts.

Before the battle of Milvian Bridge in 312, Constantine was praying when he saw a cross in the heavens with the inscription, “CONQUER BY THIS.” Constantine had that sign painted on the shields of all his soldiers before the battle. Constantine won the battle and became co-emperor of the Roman Empire with Licinius. From that point Constantine worked to promote the Christian religion in the Roman Empire.

In 318 Arius, a presbyter (priest or elder) in Alexandria, began to teach that Christ was a divine being that was created by the Father. Christ then created the world. This view made Christ “a kind of divine hero: greater than an ordinary human being, but of a lower rank than the eternal God.”{4} The Bishop of Alexandria disagreed with this view. The conflict led to a council meeting in Alexandria where Arius was excommunicated. Arius, who had the support of Eusebius, the Bishop of Nicomedia, spread his teachings through the empire. Several more meetings were held, but the controversy continued.

Constantine believed that it was his duty to promote unity in the Christian religion for the sake of the empire. Constantine wrote “My design then was, first, to bring diverse judgments found by all nations respecting the Deity to a condition, as it were, of settled uniformity ...and, second, to restore a healthy tone to the system of the world, then suffering under the power of grievous disease.”{5} Constantine called the council of Nicaea to “adjudicate the meaning of Jesus’ divinity”{6} so that there could be cultural unity in the empire. The controversy may have started as a local dispute between a bishop and a presbyter, but it spread through the

empire and caused enough division to get the attention of the empire. This was not just a local dispute any more, and involved more than just cultural influence. Theological questions that defined the very nature of Christianity were at the heart of the controversy.

Arius' argument had a logical component, and a component based on Scripture. The logical argument, or "logic of monotheism,"[{7}](#) focused on the Father's unity. Arius reasoned that if God was perfect, transcendent, and changeless, and the sustainer of all things, then everything and everyone is separate from God. If everyone is separate from God, then Jesus is separate from God. Jesus has a special role in creation and redemption but cannot be God because there is only one God. This means that Jesus is a created being. Because Jesus was created, he is subject to change. Therefore, Jesus was not God.

To popularize his argument, Arius wrote easily memorized, catchy songs set to familiar tunes, which allowed his teachings to spread across the empire. One song had the lyrics:

And by adoption had God made the Son  
Into an advancement of himself.  
Yet the Son's substance is  
Removed from the substance of the Father:  
The Son is not equal to the Father,  
Nor does he share the same substance.[{8}](#)

Arius also used Scripture as part of his argument. Arius identified wisdom with Christ. He cited Proverbs 8:22 which says, "The LORD possessed me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old." Jesus states that "the Father is greater than I" (John 14:28). Luke states that "Jesus increased in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man" (Luke 2:52). This indicates that Jesus changed, something God cannot do. Paul writes that Jesus is "the firstborn among many

brothers" (Romans 8:29). Paul also states that Jesus "is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn among all creation" (Colossians 1:15). Arius argued that these verses meant that Jesus was the first created being. John writes, "And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3). Paul writes to Timothy about God, "who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see" (1 Timothy 6:16). Arius taught that these verses taught that God was totally set apart from creation, which includes the Son.

Arius' opponents thought that he was "reading meaning into innocent passages."[\[9\]](#) To show this, these bishops looked to the Scripture to find their own proof texts. Paul writes of Jesus "though he was in the form of God, did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped" (Philippians 2:6). This verse identifies the Son with the Father. John opens his Gospel with, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). Jesus was not only *with* God, he *was* God. The author of Hebrews writes that Jesus "is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by his word and his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Hebrews 1:3). Jesus is identified as the exact imprint of the Father and the sustainer of the universe. Paul calls Jesus the "Lord of Glory" (1 Corinthians 2:8). The author of Hebrews states that "Jesus is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). Jesus does not change and neither does the Father.

The opponents of Arius countered his argument that Proverbs 8 showed that wisdom was created by pointing to verse 30, "Then I was beside him, like a master workman, and I was daily in his delight, rejoicing before him always." They argued that this verse showed that wisdom was always with God.

The orthodox bishops also responded with an argument called the "logic of salvation."[\[10\]](#) The argument is that if Christ

is not truly God, then Jesus cannot save mankind from sin. If Jesus is less than God, and is subject to sin, then his sacrifice is insufficient to redeem mankind of their sin. Paul taught this when he wrote, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21). Christ cannot make us the righteousness of God if he is not of the same substance as the Father.

In his novel Brown portrays the outcome of the Council of Nicaea as coming down to a close vote. The vote was 300 to 2. In any election this would have been called a landslide. The council instated what later became the Nicene Creed. Its statement is as follows:

We believe in one God,  
the Father almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ,  
the only Son of God,  
begotten from the Father before all ages,  
God from God,  
Light from Light,  
true God from true God,  
begotten, not made;  
of the same essence as the Father.  
Through him all things were made.

For us and for our salvation  
he came down from heaven;  
he became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary,  
and was made human.

He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate;  
he suffered and was buried.

The third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures.

He ascended to heaven  
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again with glory  
to judge the living and the dead.  
His kingdom will never end.

And we believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the Lord, the giver of life.

He proceeds from the Father and the Son,  
and with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified.

He spoke through the prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church.

We affirm one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

We look forward to the resurrection of the dead,  
and to life in the world to come. Amen.

Constantine did not decide that Jesus should be made a God, nor did he participate in the vote. The deity of Jesus was not what was at issue at this council either. The issue before the council was the nature of Jesus' relation to the Father.

The Council of Nicaea may have decided against Arius' view, but the controversy was not over yet. The Arians were exiled after the council. Eusebius of Caesarea was recalled after writing a theology that made Constantine the "earthly image of the *Logos*." [\[11\]](#) Arius was recalled from exile after giving a statement of faith that Constantine did not understand, but died unexpectedly the day before taking communion with the faithful.

Athanasius took the office of bishop of Alexandria after Alexander, the previous bishop, died. Athanasius was Alexander's advisor at the time of the council in 325. Athanasius did not welcome the Arians back into the Church, putting him in conflict with Constantine. The Arians tried to dispose of Athanasius at Tyre in 335. Athanasius was accused of abusing clergy that disagreed with him and of cutting off food to Constantinople by instigating a dock strike. Constantine banished Athanasius to Trier in Gaul.

When Constantine died, Athanasius and Marcellus, who taught that the Father and the Son were of a similar substance, were allowed to return from exile. The Eastern Empire was ruled by Constantius, and the West by Constans. The Nicene Creed was still the official doctrine, but the Arians outnumbered the orthodox Christians. To advance their cause the Arians convinced Constantius to banish Athanasius and Marcellus again. In 340 Bishop Julius recalled Athanasius and Marcellus. Marcellus' teachings were declared orthodox. However, in 341 there was a council at Antioch that rejected the teachings of Arius and Marcellus. Athanasius was not allowed a hearing at the council. The creed that was affirmed by this council excluded Arianism and condemned Marcellus. Constans and Constantius decided to call a council in Sardica. This council ended in schism between the eastern and western parts of the Empire. Athanasius abandoned Marcellus and was allowed to return to Alexandria.

In 350 Constantius gained control over the western Empire. He allowed the Arians power in the Church. Bishops were forced to turn on Athanasius. In 356 Athanasius was banished again. A creed was published in 357 that banished the philosophical language that was used in Nicaea. Basil, Marcellian's successor, taught that the Son was of the same substance as the Father; this development was encouraging to Athanasius.

When Emperor Justine ascended to power, he permitted all exiles to return. A council was held in 362 in Alexandria where the Nicene Creed was affirmed. Another council was held in 381 in Constantinople where a modified version of the Nicaea Creed was affirmed and all bishops were assured that the three persons of the Trinity were not three Gods. Three persons formed the one Triune God. It took 66 years of conflict after the Council of Nicaea for the Church to reach a conclusion about the issue.

There were four main affirmations that resulted from the Council of Nicaea. First, Christ was "very God of very

God.”{12} Jesus is God in the same sense that the Father is God. Second, Christ is “of one substance with the Father.”{13} On this point the distinction was one Greek letter. Arianism taught that Jesus was of a similar substance (*homoiousios*) with the Father. Athanasius and the orthodox Christians believed that Jesus was of the same substance (*homoousios*) with the Father. It can be said that the whole dispute was over one letter. Third, Jesus was “begotten, not made.”{14} Fourth, Jesus “became human for us men, and for our salvation.”{15} Without the work of Jesus there is no salvation of mankind.

Athanasius spent most of his life defending the truth of Christian doctrine. He was exiled five times. He placed himself on the line to fight the good fight. Athanasius deserves to be remembered as one of the greatest theologians and defenders of the truth. Even when his name is forgotten, the fruit of his work will remain.

There are many misconceptions about the Council of Nicaea in the larger culture. Constantine did not decide to declare Jesus divine. He called a council to attempt to resolve a dispute among Christians. From Constantine’s point of view, the stability of the Empire stood on the stability of the Christian religion. The Christians did not decide to declare that Jesus was divine at this council. This was a belief that was already held by the majority of Christians. The primary question that was being discussed transcended cultural boundaries. If Christ is fully God, then this transcends all cultural boundaries. If Christ is fully God, then all of mankind will be united once again to worship their king.

## Notes

1. Quoted by Hank Hanegraaff and Paul L. Maier, *The Da Vinci Code: Fact of Fiction?* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishing 2004), 15.
2. Ibid. 32.
3. Virginia Burrus and Rebecca Lyman, “Shifting the Focus of



History," in *A People's History of Christianity Vol. 2: Late Ancient Christianity*, Ed. Virginia Burrus, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 18.

4. Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), 100.

5. Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*, (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2000), 51.

6. Ibid. 48.

7. Ibid. 54.

8. Ibid. 53.

9. Ibid. 54.

10. Ibid. 55.

11. Tim Dowley, Ed. *Introduction to the History of Christianity*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 169.

12. Noll, 57.

13. Ibid. 58.

14. Ibid. 58.

15. Ibid. 58.

©2025 Probe Ministries

---

## Redeeming the Da Vinci Code

*Dr. Michael Gleghorn critiques The Da Vinci Code's theories, demonstrating that most of these theories are simply false.*



*This article is also available in [Spanish](#).*

### Introduction to *The Da Vinci Code*

Dan Brown's novel, *The Da Vinci Code*,<sup>{1}</sup> has generated a huge amount of interest from the reading public. About forty million copies have been sold worldwide.<sup>{2}</sup> And Ron Howard and Sony Pictures have brought the story to theatres.<sup>{3}</sup> To help

answer some of the challenges which this novel poses to biblical Christianity, Probe has teamed up with EvanTell, an evangelism training ministry, to produce a DVD series called *Redeeming The Da Vinci Code*. The series aims to strengthen the faith of believers and equip them to share their faith with those who see the movie or have read the book.[\[4\]](#) I hope this article will also encourage you to use this event to witness to the truth to friends or family who have read the book or seen the movie.

Why so much fuss about a novel? The story begins with the murder of the Louvre's 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 biblical Christianity. Before dying, the curator attempts to pass on the secret to his granddaughter Sophie, a cryptographer, and Harvard professor Robert Langdon, by leaving a number of clues that he hopes will guide them to the truth.

So what's the secret? 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 rather Mary Magdalene, the wife of Jesus, who carried on the royal bloodline of Christ by giving birth to His child! The Priory guards the secret location of Mary's tomb and serves to protect the bloodline of Jesus that has continued to this day!

Does anyone take these ideas seriously? Yes; they do. This is partly due to the way the story is written. The first word one encounters in *The Da Vinci Code*, in bold uppercase letters, is the word "FACT." Shortly thereafter Brown writes, "All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate."[\[5\]](#) And the average reader, with no special knowledge in these areas, will assume the statement is true. But it's not, and many have documented some of Brown's inaccuracies in these areas.[\[6\]](#)

Brown also has a way of making the novel's theories about Jesus and the early church seem credible. The theories are espoused by the novel's most educated characters: a British royal historian, Leigh Teabing, and a Harvard professor, Robert Langdon. When put in the mouths of these characters, one comes away with the impression that the theories are actually true. But are they?

In this article, I'll argue that most of what the novel says about Jesus, the Bible, and the history of the early church is simply false. I'll also say a bit about how this material can be used in evangelism.

## **Did Constantine Embellish Our Four Gospels?**

Were the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, which were later to be officially recognized as part of the New Testament canon, intentionally embellished in the fourth century at the command of Emperor Constantine? This is what Leigh Teabing, the fictional historian in *The Da Vinci Code*, suggests. At one point he states, "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" (234). Is this true?

In a letter to the church historian Eusebius, Constantine did indeed order the preparation of "fifty copies of the sacred Scriptures."[\[7\]](#) But nowhere in the letter does he command that any of the Gospels be embellished in order to make Jesus appear more godlike. And even if he had, it would have been virtually impossible to get faithful Christians to accept such accounts.

Before the reign of Constantine, the church suffered great persecution under Emperor Diocletian. It's hard to believe that the same church that had withstood this persecution would

jettison their cherished Gospels and embrace embellished accounts of Jesus' life! It's also virtually certain that had Constantine tried such a thing, we'd have lots of evidence for it in the writings of the church fathers. But we have none. Not one of them mentions an attempt by Constantine to alter any of our Gospels. And finally, to claim that the leaders of the fourth century church, many of whom had suffered persecution for their faith in Christ, would agree to join Constantine in a conspiracy of this kind is completely unrealistic.

One last point. We have copies of the four Gospels that are significantly earlier than Constantine and the Council of Nicaea (or Nicea). Although none of the copies are complete, we do have nearly complete copies of both Luke and John in a codex dated between A.D. 175 and 225—at least a hundred years before Nicaea. Another manuscript, dating from about A.D. 200 or earlier, contains most of John's Gospel.[\[8\]](#) But why is this important?

First, we can compare these pre-Nicene manuscripts with those that followed Nicaea to see if any embellishment occurred. None did. Second, the pre-Nicene versions of John's Gospel include some of the strongest declarations of Jesus' deity on record (e.g. 1:1-3; 8:58; 10:30-33). That is, the most explicit declarations of Jesus' deity in any of our Gospels are already found in manuscripts that pre-date Constantine by more than a hundred years!

If you have a non-Christian friend who believes these books were embellished, you might gently refer them to this evidence. Then, encourage them to read the Gospels for themselves and find out who Jesus really is.

But what if they think these sources can't be trusted?

## Can We Trust the Gospels?

Although there's no historical basis for the claim that Constantine embellished the New Testament Gospels to make Jesus appear more godlike, we must still ask whether the Gospels are reliable sources of information about Jesus. According to Teabing, the novel's fictional historian, "Almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is false" (235). Is this true? The answer largely depends on the reliability of our earliest biographies of Jesus—the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

Each of these Gospels was written in the first century A.D. Although they are technically anonymous, we have fairly strong evidence from second century writers such as Papias (c. A.D. 125) and Irenaeus (c. A.D. 180) for ascribing each Gospel to its traditional author. If their testimony is true (and we've little reason to doubt it), then Mark, the companion of Peter, wrote down the substance of Peter's preaching. And Luke, the companion of Paul, carefully researched the biography that bears his name. Finally, Matthew and John, two of Jesus' twelve disciples, wrote the books ascribed to them. If this is correct, then the events recorded in these Gospels "are based on either direct or indirect eyewitness testimony."[\[9\]](#)

But did the Gospel writers intend to reliably record the life and ministry of Jesus? Were they even interested in history, or did their theological agendas overshadow any desire they may have had to tell us what really happened? Craig Blomberg, a New Testament scholar, observes that the prologue to Luke's Gospel "reads very much like prefaces to other generally trusted historical and biographical works of antiquity." He further notes that since Matthew and Mark are similar to Luke in terms of genre, "it seems reasonable that Luke's historical intent would closely mirror theirs."[\[10\]](#) Finally, John tells us that he wrote his Gospel so that people might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing

they might have life in His name (20:31). While this statement admittedly reveals a theological agenda, Blomberg points out that “if you’re going to be convinced enough to believe, the theology has to flow from accurate history.”[\[11\]](#)

Interestingly, the disciplines of history and archaeology are a great help in corroborating the general reliability of the Gospel writers. Where these authors mention people, places, and events that can be checked against other ancient sources, they are consistently shown to be quite reliable. We need to let our non-Christian friends know that we have good grounds for trusting the New Testament Gospels and believing what they say about Jesus.

But what if they ask about those Gospels that didn’t make it into the New Testament? Specifically, what if they ask about the Nag Hammadi documents?

## The Nag Hammadi Documents

Since their discovery in 1945, there’s been much interest in the Nag Hammadi texts. What are these documents? When were they written, and by whom, and for what purpose? According to Teabing, the historian in *The Da Vinci Code*, the Nag Hammadi texts represent “the earliest Christian records” (245). These “unaltered gospels,” he claims, tell the real story about Jesus and early Christianity (248). The New Testament Gospels are allegedly a later, corrupted version of these events.

The only difficulty with Teabing’s theory is that it’s wrong. The Nag Hammadi documents are not “the earliest Christian records.” Every book in the New Testament is earlier. The New Testament documents were all written in the first century A.D. By contrast, the dates for the Nag Hammadi texts range from the second to the third century A.D. As Darrell Bock observes in *Breaking The Da Vinci Code*, “The bulk of this material is a few generations removed from the foundations of the Christian

faith, a vital point to remember when assessing the contents.”[{12}](#)

What do we know about the contents of these books? It is generally agreed that the Nag Hammadi texts are Gnostic documents. The key tenet of Gnosticism is that salvation comes through secret knowledge. As a result, the Gnostic Gospels, in striking contrast to their New Testament counterparts, place almost no value on the death and resurrection of Jesus. Indeed, Gnostic Christology had a tendency to separate the human Jesus from the divine Christ, seeing them as two distinct beings. It was not the divine Christ who suffered and died; it was merely the human Jesus—or perhaps even Simon of Cyrene.[{13}](#) It didn’t matter much to the Gnostics because in their view the death of Jesus was irrelevant for attaining salvation. What was truly important was not the death of the man Jesus but the secret knowledge brought by the divine Christ. According to the Gnostics, salvation came through a correct understanding of this secret knowledge.[{14}](#)

Clearly these doctrines are incompatible with the New Testament teaching about Christ and salvation (e.g. Rom. 3:21-26; 5:1-11; 1 Cor. 15:3-11; Tit. 2:11-14). Ironically, they’re also incompatible with Teabing’s view that the Nag Hammadi texts “speak of Christ’s ministry in very human terms” (234). The Nag Hammadi texts actually present Christ as a divine being, though quite differently from the New Testament perspective.[{15}](#)

Thus, the Nag Hammadi texts are both later than the New Testament writings and characterized by a worldview that is entirely alien to their theology. We must explain to our non-Christian friends that the church fathers exercised great wisdom in rejecting these books from the New Testament.

But what if they ask us how it was decided what books to include?

# The Formation of the New Testament Canon

In the early centuries of Christianity, many books were written about the teachings of Jesus and His apostles. Most of these books never made it into the New Testament. They include such titles as The Gospel of Philip, The Acts of John, and The Apocalypse of Peter. How did the early church decide what books to include in the New Testament and what to reject? When were these decisions made, and by whom? According to the Teabing, "The Bible, as we know it today, was collated by . . . Constantine the Great" (231). Is this true?

The early church had definite criteria that had to be met for a book to be included in the New Testament. As Bart Ehrman observes, a book had to be ancient, written close to the time of Jesus. It had to be written either by an apostle or a companion of an apostle. It had to be consistent with the orthodox understanding of the faith. And it had to be widely recognized and accepted by the church.[\[16\]](#) Books that didn't meet these criteria weren't included in the New Testament.

When were these decisions made? And who made them? There wasn't an ecumenical council in the early church that officially decreed that the twenty-seven books now in our New Testament were the right ones.[\[17\]](#) Rather, the canon gradually took shape as the church recognized and embraced those books that were inspired by God. The earliest collections of books "to circulate among the churches in the first half of the second century" were our four Gospels and the letters of Paul.[\[18\]](#) Not until the heretic Marcion published his expurgated version of the New Testament in about A.D. 144 did church leaders seek to define the canon more specifically.[\[19\]](#)

Toward the end of the second century there was a growing consensus that the canon should include the four Gospels, Acts, the thirteen Pauline epistles, "epistles by other 'apostolic men' and the Revelation of John."[\[20\]](#) The Muratorian Canon, which dates toward the end of the second



century, recognized every New Testament book except Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, and 3 John. Similar though not identical books were recognized by Irenaeus in the late second century and Origen in the early third century. So while the earliest listing of all the books in our New Testament comes from Athanasius in A.D. 367, there was widespread agreement on most of these books (including the four Gospels) by the end of the second century. By sharing this information “with gentleness and respect” (1 Pet. 3:15), we can help our friends see that the New Testament canon did not result from a decision by Constantine.

## Who Was Mary Magdalene? (Part 1)

Mary Magdalene, of course, is a major figure in *The Da Vinci Code*. Let’s take a look at Mary, beginning by addressing the unfortunate misconception that she was a prostitute. Where did this notion come from? And why do so many people believe it?

According to Leigh Teabing, the popular understanding of Mary Magdalene as a prostitute “is the legacy of a smear campaign . . . by the early Church.” In Teabing’s view, “The Church needed to defame Mary . . . to cover up her dangerous secret—her role as the Holy Grail” (244). Remember, in this novel the Holy Grail is not the cup used by Jesus at the Last Supper. Instead it’s Mary Magdalene, who’s alleged to have been both Jesus’ wife and the one who carried His royal bloodline in her womb.

How should we respond to this? Did the early church really seek to slander Mary as a prostitute in order to cover up her intimate relationship with Jesus? The first recorded instance of Mary Magdalene being misidentified as a prostitute occurred in a sermon by Pope Gregory the Great in A.D. 591.[\[21\]](#) Most likely, this wasn’t a deliberate attempt to slander Mary’s character. Rather, Gregory probably misinterpreted some passages in the Gospels, resulting in his incorrectly

identifying Mary as a prostitute.

For instance, he may have identified the unnamed sinful woman in Luke 7, who anointed Jesus' feet, with Mary of Bethany in John 12, who also anointed Jesus' feet shortly before His death. This would have been easy to do because, although there are differences, there are also many similarities between the two separate incidents. If Gregory thought the sinful woman of Luke 7 was the Mary of John 12, he may then have mistakenly linked this woman with Mary Magdalene. Interestingly, Luke mentions Mary Magdalene for the first time at the beginning of chapter 8, right after the story of Jesus' anointing in Luke 7. Since the unnamed woman in Luke 7 was likely guilty of some kind of sexual sin, if Gregory thought this woman was Mary Magdalene, then it wouldn't be too great a leap to infer she was a prostitute.

If you're discussing the novel with someone who is hostile toward the church, don't be afraid to admit that the church has sometimes made mistakes. We can agree that Gregory was mistaken when he misidentified Mary as a prostitute. But we must also observe that it's quite unlikely that this was part of a smear campaign by the early church. We must remind our friends that Christians make mistakes—and even sin—just like everyone else (Rom. 3:23). The difference is that we've recognized our need for a Savior from sin. And in this respect, we're actually following in the footsteps of Mary Magdalene (John 20:1-18)!

## **Who Was Mary Magdalene? (Part 2)**

What do our earliest written sources reveal about the real Mary Magdalene? According to Teabing, Mary was the wife of Jesus, the mother of His child, and the one whom He intended to establish the church after His death (244-48). In support of these theories, Teabing appeals to two of the Gnostic Gospels: The Gospel of Philip and The Gospel of Mary

[Magdalene]. Let's look first at The Gospel of Mary.

The section of this Gospel quoted in the novel presents an incredulous apostle Peter who simply can't believe that the risen Christ has secretly revealed information to Mary that He didn't reveal to His male disciples. Levi rebukes Peter: "If the Saviour made her worthy, who are you . . . to reject her? Surely the Saviour knows her very well. That is why he loved her more than us" (247).

What can we say about this passage? First, we must observe that nowhere in this Gospel are we told that Mary was Jesus' wife or the mother of His child. Second, many scholars think this text should probably be read symbolically, with Peter representing early Christian orthodoxy and Mary representing a form of Gnosticism. This Gospel is probably claiming that "Mary" (that is, the Gnostics) has received divine revelation, even if "Peter" (that is, the orthodox) can't believe it.[{22}](#) Finally, even if this text should be read literally, we have little reason to think it's historically reliable. It was likely composed sometime in the late second century, about a hundred years after the canonical Gospels.[{23}](#) So, contrary to what's implied in the novel, it certainly wasn't written by Mary Magdalene—or any of Jesus' other original followers.[{24}](#)

If we want reliable information about Mary, we must turn to our earliest sources—the New Testament Gospels. These sources tell us that Mary was a follower of Jesus from the town of Magdala. After Jesus cast seven demons out of her, she (along with other women) helped support His ministry (Luke 8:1-3). She witnessed Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection, and was the first to see the risen Christ (Matt. 27:55-61; John 20:11-18). Jesus even entrusted her with proclaiming His resurrection to His male disciples (John 20:17-18). In this sense, Mary was an "apostle" to the apostles.[{25}](#) This is all the Gospels tell us about Mary.[{26}](#) We can agree with our non-Christian friends that she was a very important woman. But we must also remind them that there's nothing to suggest that she

was Jesus' wife, or that He intended her to lead the church.

All this aside, someone who's read *The Da Vinci Code* might still have questions about The Gospel of Philip? Doesn't this text indicate that Mary and Jesus were married?

## Was Jesus Married? (Part 1)

Undoubtedly, the strongest textual evidence that Jesus was married comes from The Gospel of Philip. So it's not surprising that Leigh Teabing, should appeal to this text. The section of this Gospel quoted in the novel reads as follows:

*And the companion of the Saviour is Mary Magdalene. Christ loved her more than all the disciples and used to kiss her often on her mouth. The rest of the disciples were offended by it and expressed disapproval. They said to him, "Why do you love her more than all of us?" (246).*

Now, notice that the first line refers to Mary as the companion of the Savior. In the novel, Teabing clinches his argument that Jesus and Mary were married by stating, "As any Aramaic scholar will tell you, the word companion, in those days, literally meant spouse" (246). This sounds pretty convincing. Was Jesus married after all?

When discussing this issue with a non-Christian friend, point out that we must proceed carefully here. The Gospel of Philip was originally written in Greek.[\[27\]](#) Therefore, what the term "companion" meant in Aramaic is entirely irrelevant. Even in the Coptic translation found at Nag Hammadi, a Greek loan word (*koinonos*) lies behind the term translated "companion". Darrell Bock observes that this is "not the typical . . . term for 'wife'" in Greek.[\[28\]](#) Indeed, *koinonos* is most often used in the New Testament to refer to a "partner." Luke uses the

term to describe James and John as Peter's business partners (Luke 5:10). So contrary to the claim of Teabing, the statement that Mary was Jesus' companion does not at all prove that she was His wife.

But what about the following statement: "Christ loved her . . . and used to kiss her often on her mouth"?

First, this portion of the manuscript is damaged. We don't actually know where Christ kissed Mary. There's a hole in the manuscript at that place. Some believe that "she was kissed on her cheek or forehead since either term fits in the break."[\[29\]](#) Second, even if the text said that Christ kissed Mary on her mouth, it wouldn't necessarily mean that something sexual is in view. Most scholars agree that Gnostic texts contain a lot of symbolism. To read such texts literally, therefore, is to misread them. Finally, regardless of the author's intention, this Gospel wasn't written until the second half of the third century, over two hundred years after the time of Jesus.[\[30\]](#) So the reference to Jesus kissing Mary is almost certainly not historically reliable.

We must show our non-Christian friends that The Gospel of Philip offers insufficient evidence that Jesus was married. But what if they've bought into the novel's contention that it would have been odd for Jesus to be single?

## Was Jesus Married? (Part 2)

The two most educated characters in *The Da Vinci Code* claim that an unmarried Jesus is quite improbable. Leigh Teabing says, "Jesus as a married man makes infinitely more sense than our standard biblical view of Jesus as a bachelor" (245). Robert Langdon, Harvard professor of Religious Symbolology, concurs:

*Jesus was a Jew, and the social decorum during that time virtually forbid a Jewish man to be unmarried. According to*

*Jewish custom, celibacy was condemned. . . . If Jesus were not married, at least one of the Bible's Gospels would have mentioned it and offered some explanation for His unnatural state of bachelorhood (245).*

Is this true? What if our non-Christian friends want a response to such claims?

In his excellent book *Breaking The Da Vinci Code*, Darrell Bock persuasively argues that an unmarried Jesus is not at all improbable.[\[31\]](#) Of course, it's certainly true that most Jewish men of Jesus' day did marry. It's also true that marriage was often viewed as a fundamental human obligation, especially in light of God's command to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (Gen. 1:28). Nevertheless, by the first century there were recognized, and even lauded, exceptions to this general rule.

The first century Jewish writer, Philo of Alexandria, described the Essenes as those who "repudiate marriage . . . for no one of the Essenes ever marries a wife."[\[32\]](#) Interestingly, the Essenes not only escaped condemnation for their celibacy, they were often admired. Philo also wrote, "This now is the enviable system of life of these Essenes, so that not only private individuals but even mighty kings, admiring the men, venerate their sect, and increase . . . the honors which they confer on them."[\[33\]](#) Such citations clearly reveal that not all Jews of Jesus' day considered marriage obligatory. And those who sought to avoid marriage for religious reasons were often admired rather than condemned.

It may be helpful to remind your friend that the Bible nowhere condemns singleness. Indeed, it praises those who choose to remain single to devote themselves to the work of the Lord (e.g. 1 Cor. 7:25-38). Point your friend to Matthew 19:12, where Jesus explains that some people "have renounced marriage

because of the kingdom of heaven" (NIV). Notice His conclusion, "The one who can accept this should accept it." It's virtually certain that Jesus had accepted this. He had renounced marriage to fully devote Himself to the work of His heavenly Father. What's more, since there was precedent in the first century for Jewish men to remain single for religious reasons, Jesus' singleness would not have been condemned. Let your friend know that, contrary to the claims of *The Da Vinci Code*, it would have been completely acceptable for Jesus to be unmarried.

## **Did Jesus' Earliest Followers Proclaim His Deity?**

We've considered *The Da Vinci Code*'s claim that Jesus was married and found it wanting. Mark Roberts observed "that most proponents of the marriage of Jesus thesis have an agenda. They are trying to strip Jesus of his uniqueness, and especially his deity."[\[34\]](#) This is certainly true of *The Da Vinci Code*. Not only does it call into question Jesus' deity by alleging that He was married, it also maintains that His earliest followers never even believed He was divine! According to Teabing, the doctrine of Christ's deity originally resulted from a vote at the Council of Nicaea. He further asserts, "until that moment in history, Jesus was viewed by His followers as a mortal prophet . . . a great and powerful man, but a man nonetheless" (233). Did Jesus' earliest followers really believe that He was just a man? If our non-Christian friends have questions about this, let's view it as a great opportunity to tell them who Jesus really is!

The Council of Nicaea met in A.D. 325. By then, Jesus' followers had been proclaiming His deity for nearly three centuries. Our earliest written sources about the life of Jesus are found in the New Testament. These first century

documents repeatedly affirm the deity of Christ. For instance, in his letter to the Colossians, the apostle Paul declared, "For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form" (2:9; see also Rom. 9:5; Phil. 2:5-11; Tit. 2:13). And John wrote, "In the beginning was the Word . . . and the Word was God . . . And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us" (1:1, 14).

There are also affirmations of Jesus' deity in the writings of the pre-Nicene church fathers. In the early second century, Ignatius of Antioch wrote of "our God, Jesus the Christ."[\[35\]](#) Similar affirmations can be found throughout these writings. There's even non-Christian testimony from the second century that Christians believed in Christ's divinity. Pliny the Younger wrote to Emperor Trajan, around A.D. 112, that the early Christians "were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day . . . when they sang . . . a hymn to Christ, as to a god."[\[36\]](#)

If we humbly share this information with our non-Christian friends, we can help them see that Christians believed in Christ's deity long before the Council of Nicaea. We might even be able to explain why Christians were so convinced of His deity that they were willing to die rather than deny it. If so, we can invite our friends to believe in Jesus for themselves. "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).

## Notes

1. Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).
2. See Dan Brown's official website at [www.danbrown.com/meet\\_dan/](http://www.danbrown.com/meet_dan/) (February 1, 2006).
3. See the Sony Pictures website at [www.sonypictures.com/movies/thedavincicode/](http://www.sonypictures.com/movies/thedavincicode/) (February 1, 2006).
4. More information is available about the series at



[www.probe.org](http://www.probe.org).

5. Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, 1.

6. For example, see Sandra Miesel, "Dismantling The Da Vinci Code," at [www.crisismagazine.com/september2003/feature1.htm](http://www.crisismagazine.com/september2003/feature1.htm) and James Patrick Holding, "Not InDavincible: A Review and Critique of The Da Vinci Code," at [www.answers.org/issues/davincicode.html](http://www.answers.org/issues/davincicode.html).

7. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (Reprint. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1952), 1:549, cited in Norman Geisler and William Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible: Revised and Expanded* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 282.

8. For more information see Geisler and Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, 390.

9. Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1998), 25.

10. Ibid., 39-40.

11. Ibid., 40.

12. Darrell Bock, *Breaking The Da Vinci Code* (n.p.: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2004), 52 (pre-publication manuscript copy).

13. Ibid., 62-63. See also *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter and The Second Treatise of the Great Seth* in Bart Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It Into The New Testament*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 78-86.

14. For example, *The Coptic Gospel of Thomas* (saying 1), in Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures*, 20.

15. Bock, *Breaking The Da Vinci Code*, 63.

16. Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: Christian Scriptures and the Battles Over Authentication* (Chantilly, Virginia: The Teaching Company: Course Guidebook, part 2, 2002), 37.

17. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures*, 341.

18. F.F. Bruce, "Canon," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight and I. Howard Marshall, eds. (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 95.

19. Ibid., 95-96.

20. Ibid., 96.

21. Darrell Bock, *Breaking The Da Vinci Code* (n.p. Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2004), 25-26 (pre-publication manuscript copy). I have relied heavily on Dr. Bock's analysis in this section.
22. Ibid., 116-17.
23. Bart Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures*, 35.
24. Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*. On page 247 we read, "Sophie had not known a gospel existed in Magdalene's words."
25. An "apostle" can simply refer to "one sent" as an envoy or messenger. Mary was an "apostle" in this sense, since she was sent by Jesus to tell the disciples of His resurrection.
26. For more information see Bock, *Breaking The Da Vinci Code*, 16-18.
27. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures*, 19.
28. Bock, *Breaking The Da Vinci Code*, 22.
29. Ibid., 21.
30. Ibid., 20.
31. In this section I have relied heavily on chapter 3 of Bock, *Breaking The Da Vinci Code*, pp. 40-49 (pre-publication copy).
32. Philo, *Hypothetica*, 11.14-17, cited in Bock, *Breaking The Da Vinci Code*, 43.
33. Ibid., 44.
34. Mark D. Roberts, "Was Jesus Married? A Careful Look at the Real Evidence," at [www.markdroberts.com/htmlfiles/resources/jesusmarried.htm](http://www.markdroberts.com/htmlfiles/resources/jesusmarried.htm), January, 2004.
35. Ignatius of Antioch, "Ephesians," 18:2, cited in Jack N. Sparks, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. Robert M. Grant (New York: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1978), 83.
36. Pliny, *Letters*, transl. by William Melmoth, rev. by W.M.L. Hutchinson (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1935), vol. II, X:96, cited in Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 199.

---

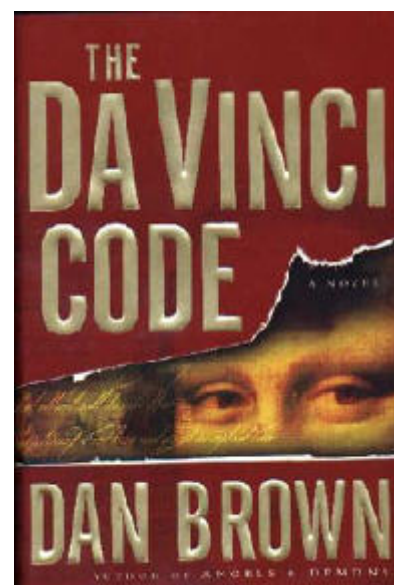
# Redeeming The Da Vinci Code

*This article is also available in [Spanish](#).*



## Introduction to *The Da Vinci Code*

Dan Brown's novel, *The Da Vinci Code*,[\[1\]](#) has generated a huge amount of interest from the reading public. About forty million copies have been sold worldwide.[\[2\]](#) And Ron Howard and Sony Pictures have brought the story to theatres.[\[3\]](#) To help answer some of the challenges which this novel poses to biblical Christianity, Probe has teamed up with EvanTell, an evangelism training ministry, to produce a DVD series called *Redeeming The Da Vinci Code*. The series aims to strengthen the faith of believers and equip them to share their faith with those who see the movie or have read the book.[\[4\]](#) I hope this article will also encourage you to use this event to witness to the truth to friends or family who have read the book or seen the movie.



Why so much fuss about a novel? The story begins with the murder of the Louvre's 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 biblical Christianity. Before dying, the curator attempts to pass on the secret to his granddaughter Sophie, a cryptographer, and Harvard professor Robert Langdon, by leaving a number of clues that he hopes will guide them to the truth.

So what's the secret? 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 rather Mary Magdalene, the wife of Jesus, who carried on the royal bloodline of Christ by giving birth to His child! The Priory guards the secret location of Mary's tomb and serves to protect the bloodline of Jesus that has continued to this day!

Does anyone take these ideas seriously? Yes; they do. This is partly due to the way the story is written. The first word one encounters in *The Da Vinci Code*, in bold uppercase letters, is the word "FACT." Shortly thereafter Brown writes, "All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate."[\[5\]](#) And the average reader, with no special knowledge in these areas, will assume the statement is true. But it's not, and many have documented some of Brown's inaccuracies in these areas.[\[6\]](#)

Brown also has a way of making the novel's theories about Jesus and the early church seem credible. The theories are espoused by the novel's most educated characters: a British royal historian, Leigh Teabing, and a Harvard professor, Robert Langdon. When put in the mouths of these characters, one comes away with the impression that the theories are actually true. But are they?

In this article, I'll argue that most of what the novel says about Jesus, the Bible, and the history of the early church is simply false. I'll also say a bit about how this material can be used in evangelism.

## **Did Constantine Embellish Our Four Gospels?**

Were the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, which were later to be officially recognized as part of the New Testament canon, intentionally embellished in the fourth century at the

command of Emperor Constantine? This is what Leigh Teabing, the fictional historian in *The Da Vinci Code*, suggests. At one point he states, "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" (234). Is this true?

In a letter to the church historian Eusebius, Constantine did indeed order the preparation of "fifty copies of the sacred Scriptures."[\[7\]](#) But nowhere in the letter does he command that any of the Gospels be embellished in order to make Jesus appear more godlike. And even if he had, it would have been virtually impossible to get faithful Christians to accept such accounts.

Before the reign of Constantine, the church suffered great persecution under Emperor Diocletian. It's hard to believe that the same church that had withstood this persecution would jettison their cherished Gospels and embrace embellished accounts of Jesus' life! It's also virtually certain that had Constantine tried such a thing, we'd have lots of evidence for it in the writings of the church fathers. But we have none. Not one of them mentions an attempt by Constantine to alter any of our Gospels. And finally, to claim that the leaders of the fourth century church, many of whom had suffered persecution for their faith in Christ, would agree to join Constantine in a conspiracy of this kind is completely unrealistic.

One last point. We have copies of the four Gospels that are significantly earlier than Constantine and the Council of Nicaea (or Nicea). Although none of the copies are complete, we do have nearly complete copies of both Luke and John in a codex dated between A.D. 175 and 225—at least a hundred years before Nicaea. Another manuscript, dating from about A.D. 200 or earlier, contains most of John's Gospel.[\[8\]](#) But why is this important?

First, we can compare these pre-Nicene manuscripts with those that followed Nicaea to see if any embellishment occurred. None did. Second, the pre-Nicene versions of John's Gospel include some of the strongest declarations of Jesus' deity on record (e.g. 1:1-3; 8:58; 10:30-33). That is, the most explicit declarations of Jesus' deity in any of our Gospels are already found in manuscripts that pre-date Constantine by more than a hundred years!

If you have a non-Christian friend who believes these books were embellished, you might gently refer them to this evidence. Then, encourage them to read the Gospels for themselves and find out who Jesus really is.

But what if they think these sources can't be trusted?

## **Can We Trust the Gospels?**

Although there's no historical basis for the claim that Constantine embellished the New Testament Gospels to make Jesus appear more godlike, we must still ask whether the Gospels are reliable sources of information about Jesus. According to Teabing, the novel's fictional historian, "Almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is false" (235). Is this true? The answer largely depends on the reliability of our earliest biographies of Jesus—the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

Each of these Gospels was written in the first century A.D. Although they are technically anonymous, we have fairly strong evidence from second century writers such as Papias (c. A.D. 125) and Irenaeus (c. A.D. 180) for ascribing each Gospel to its traditional author. If their testimony is true (and we've little reason to doubt it), then Mark, the companion of Peter, wrote down the substance of Peter's preaching. And Luke, the companion of Paul, carefully researched the biography that bears his name. Finally, Matthew and John, two of Jesus'

twelve disciples, wrote the books ascribed to them. If this is correct, then the events recorded in these Gospels “are based on either direct or indirect eyewitness testimony.”[{9}](#)

But did the Gospel writers intend to reliably record the life and ministry of Jesus? Were they even interested in history, or did their theological agendas overshadow any desire they may have had to tell us what really happened? Craig Blomberg, a New Testament scholar, observes that the prologue to Luke’s Gospel “reads very much like prefaces to other generally trusted historical and biographical works of antiquity.” He further notes that since Matthew and Mark are similar to Luke in terms of genre, “it seems reasonable that Luke’s historical intent would closely mirror theirs.”[{10}](#) Finally, John tells us that he wrote his Gospel so that people might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing they might have life in His name (20:31). While this statement admittedly reveals a theological agenda, Blomberg points out that “if you’re going to be convinced enough to believe, the theology has to flow from accurate history.”[{11}](#)

Interestingly, the disciplines of history and archaeology are a great help in corroborating the general reliability of the Gospel writers. Where these authors mention people, places, and events that can be checked against other ancient sources, they are consistently shown to be quite reliable. We need to let our non-Christian friends know that we have good grounds for trusting the New Testament Gospels and believing what they say about Jesus.

But what if they ask about those Gospels that didn’t make it into the New Testament? Specifically, what if they ask about the Nag Hammadi documents?

## **The Nag Hammadi Documents**

Since their discovery in 1945, there’s been much interest in



the Nag Hammadi texts. What are these documents? When were they written, and by whom, and for what purpose? According to Teabing, the historian in *The Da Vinci Code*, the Nag Hammadi texts represent “the earliest Christian records” (245). These “unaltered gospels,” he claims, tell the real story about Jesus and early Christianity (248). The New Testament Gospels are allegedly a later, corrupted version of these events.

The only difficulty with Teabing’s theory is that it’s wrong. The Nag Hammadi documents are not “the earliest Christian records.” Every book in the New Testament is earlier. The New Testament documents were all written in the first century A.D. By contrast, the dates for the Nag Hammadi texts range from the second to the third century A.D. As Darrell Bock observes in *Breaking The Da Vinci Code*, “The bulk of this material is a few generations removed from the foundations of the Christian faith, a vital point to remember when assessing the contents.”[{12}](#)

What do we know about the contents of these books? It is generally agreed that the Nag Hammadi texts are Gnostic documents. The key tenet of Gnosticism is that salvation comes through secret knowledge. As a result, the Gnostic Gospels, in striking contrast to their New Testament counterparts, place almost no value on the death and resurrection of Jesus. Indeed, Gnostic Christology had a tendency to separate the human Jesus from the divine Christ, seeing them as two distinct beings. It was not the divine Christ who suffered and died; it was merely the human Jesus—or perhaps even Simon of Cyrene.[{13}](#) It didn’t matter much to the Gnostics because in their view the death of Jesus was irrelevant for attaining salvation. What was truly important was not the death of the man Jesus but the secret knowledge brought by the divine Christ. According to the Gnostics, salvation came through a correct understanding of this secret knowledge.[{14}](#)

Clearly these doctrines are incompatible with the New Testament teaching about Christ and salvation (e.g. Rom.



3:21-26; 5:1-11; 1 Cor. 15:3-11; Tit. 2:11-14). Ironically, they're also incompatible with Teabing's view that the Nag Hammadi texts "speak of Christ's ministry in very human terms" (234). The Nag Hammadi texts actually present Christ as a divine being, though quite differently from the New Testament perspective.[\[15\]](#)

Thus, the Nag Hammadi texts are both later than the New Testament writings and characterized by a worldview that is entirely alien to their theology. We must explain to our non-Christian friends that the church fathers exercised great wisdom in rejecting these books from the New Testament.

But what if they ask us how it was decided what books to include?

## **The Formation of the New Testament Canon**

In the early centuries of Christianity, many books were written about the teachings of Jesus and His apostles. Most of these books never made it into the New Testament. They include such titles as The Gospel of Philip, The Acts of John, and The Apocalypse of Peter. How did the early church decide what books to include in the New Testament and what to reject? When were these decisions made, and by whom? According to the Teabing, "The Bible, as we know it today, was collated by . . . Constantine the Great" (231). Is this true?

The early church had definite criteria that had to be met for a book to be included in the New Testament. As Bart Ehrman observes, a book had to be ancient, written close to the time of Jesus. It had to be written either by an apostle or a companion of an apostle. It had to be consistent with the orthodox understanding of the faith. And it had to be widely recognized and accepted by the church.[\[16\]](#) Books that didn't meet these criteria weren't included in the New Testament.

When were these decisions made? And who made them? There

wasn't an ecumenical council in the early church that officially decreed that the twenty-seven books now in our New Testament were the right ones.[{17}](#) Rather, the canon gradually took shape as the church recognized and embraced those books that were inspired by God. The earliest collections of books "to circulate among the churches in the first half of the second century" were our four Gospels and the letters of Paul.[{18}](#) Not until the heretic Marcion published his expurgated version of the New Testament in about A.D. 144 did church leaders seek to define the canon more specifically.[{19}](#)

Toward the end of the second century there was a growing consensus that the canon should include the four Gospels, Acts, the thirteen Pauline epistles, "epistles by other 'apostolic men' and the Revelation of John."[{20}](#) The Muratorian Canon, which dates toward the end of the second century, recognized every New Testament book except Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, and 3 John. Similar though not identical books were recognized by Irenaeus in the late second century and Origen in the early third century. So while the earliest listing of all the books in our New Testament comes from Athanasius in A.D. 367, there was widespread agreement on most of these books (including the four Gospels) by the end of the second century. By sharing this information "with gentleness and respect" (1 Pet. 3:15), we can help our friends see that the New Testament canon did not result from a decision by Constantine.

## Who Was Mary Magdalene? (Part 1)

Mary Magdalene, of course, is a major figure in *The Da Vinci Code*. Let's take a look at Mary, beginning by addressing the unfortunate misconception that she was a prostitute. Where did this notion come from? And why do so many people believe it?

According to Leigh Teabing, the popular understanding of Mary Magdalene as a prostitute "is the legacy of a smear campaign .

. . by the early Church.” In Teabing’s view, “The Church needed to defame Mary . . . to cover up her dangerous secret—her role as the Holy Grail” (244). Remember, in this novel the Holy Grail is not the cup used by Jesus at the Last Supper. Instead it’s Mary Magdalene, who’s alleged to have been both Jesus’ wife and the one who carried His royal bloodline in her womb.

How should we respond to this? Did the early church really seek to slander Mary as a prostitute in order to cover up her intimate relationship with Jesus? The first recorded instance of Mary Magdalene being misidentified as a prostitute occurred in a sermon by Pope Gregory the Great in A.D. 591.[\[21\]](#) Most likely, this wasn’t a deliberate attempt to slander Mary’s character. Rather, Gregory probably misinterpreted some passages in the Gospels, resulting in his incorrectly identifying Mary as a prostitute.

For instance, he may have identified the unnamed sinful woman in Luke 7, who anointed Jesus’ feet, with Mary of Bethany in John 12, who also anointed Jesus’ feet shortly before His death. This would have been easy to do because, although there are differences, there are also many similarities between the two separate incidents. If Gregory thought the sinful woman of Luke 7 was the Mary of John 12, he may then have mistakenly linked this woman with Mary Magdalene. Interestingly, Luke mentions Mary Magdalene for the first time at the beginning of chapter 8, right after the story of Jesus’ anointing in Luke 7. Since the unnamed woman in Luke 7 was likely guilty of some kind of sexual sin, if Gregory thought this woman was Mary Magdalene, then it wouldn’t be too great a leap to infer she was a prostitute.

If you’re discussing the novel with someone who is hostile toward the church, don’t be afraid to admit that the church has sometimes made mistakes. We can agree that Gregory was mistaken when he misidentified Mary as a prostitute. But we must also observe that it’s quite unlikely that this was part

of a smear campaign by the early church. We must remind our friends that Christians make mistakes—and even sin—just like everyone else (Rom. 3:23). The difference is that we’ve recognized our need for a Savior from sin. And in this respect, we’re actually following in the footsteps of Mary Magdalene (John 20:1-18)!

## Who Was Mary Magdalene? (Part 2)

What do our earliest written sources reveal about the real Mary Magdalene? According to Teabing, Mary was the wife of Jesus, the mother of His child, and the one whom He intended to establish the church after His death (244-48). In support of these theories, Teabing appeals to two of the Gnostic Gospels: The Gospel of Philip and The Gospel of Mary [Magdalene]. Let’s look first at The Gospel of Mary.

The section of this Gospel quoted in the novel presents an incredulous apostle Peter who simply can’t believe that the risen Christ has secretly revealed information to Mary that He didn’t reveal to His male disciples. Levi rebukes Peter: “If the Saviour made her worthy, who are you . . . to reject her? Surely the Saviour knows her very well. That is why he loved her more than us” (247).

What can we say about this passage? First, we must observe that nowhere in this Gospel are we told that Mary was Jesus’ wife or the mother of His child. Second, many scholars think this text should probably be read symbolically, with Peter representing early Christian orthodoxy and Mary representing a form of Gnosticism. This Gospel is probably claiming that “Mary” (that is, the Gnostics) has received divine revelation, even if “Peter” (that is, the orthodox) can’t believe it.[{22}](#) Finally, even if this text should be read literally, we have little reason to think it’s historically reliable. It was likely composed sometime in the late second century, about a hundred years after the canonical Gospels.[{23}](#) So, contrary to

what's implied in the novel, it certainly wasn't written by Mary Magdalene—or any of Jesus' other original followers.[\[24\]](#)

If we want reliable information about Mary, we must turn to our earliest sources—the New Testament Gospels. These sources tell us that Mary was a follower of Jesus from the town of Magdala. After Jesus cast seven demons out of her, she (along with other women) helped support His ministry (Luke 8:1-3). She witnessed Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection, and was the first to see the risen Christ (Matt. 27:55-61; John 20:11-18). Jesus even entrusted her with proclaiming His resurrection to His male disciples (John 20:17-18). In this sense, Mary was an “apostle” to the apostles.[\[25\]](#) This is all the Gospels tell us about Mary.[\[26\]](#) We can agree with our non-Christian friends that she was a very important woman. But we must also remind them that there's nothing to suggest that she was Jesus' wife, or that He intended her to lead the church.

All this aside, someone who's read *The Da Vinci Code* might still have questions about The Gospel of Philip? Doesn't this text indicate that Mary and Jesus were married?

## Was Jesus Married? (Part 1)

Undoubtedly, the strongest textual evidence that Jesus was married comes from The Gospel of Philip. So it's not surprising that Leigh Teabing, should appeal to this text. The section of this Gospel quoted in the novel reads as follows:

And the companion of the Saviour is Mary Magdalene. Christ loved her more than all the disciples and used to kiss her often on her mouth. The rest of the disciples were offended by it and expressed disapproval. They said to him, “Why do you love her more than all of us?” (246).

Now, notice that the first line refers to Mary as the companion of the Savior. In the novel, Teabing clinches his argument that Jesus and Mary were married by stating, “As any

Aramaic scholar will tell you, the word companion, in those days, literally meant spouse” (246). This sounds pretty convincing. Was Jesus married after all?

When discussing this issue with a non-Christian friend, point out that we must proceed carefully here. The Gospel of Philip was originally written in Greek.[{27}](#) Therefore, what the term “companion” meant in Aramaic is entirely irrelevant. Even in the Coptic translation found at Nag Hammadi, a Greek loan word (*koinonos*) lies behind the term translated “companion”. Darrell Bock observes that this is “not the typical . . . term for ‘wife’” in Greek.[{28}](#) Indeed, *koinonos* is most often used in the New Testament to refer to a “partner.” Luke uses the term to describe James and John as Peter’s business partners (Luke 5:10). So contrary to the claim of Teabing, the statement that Mary was Jesus’ companion does not at all prove that she was His wife.

But what about the following statement: “Christ loved her . . . and used to kiss her often on her mouth”?

First, this portion of the manuscript is damaged. We don’t actually know where Christ kissed Mary. There’s a hole in the manuscript at that place. Some believe that “she was kissed on her cheek or forehead since either term fits in the break.”[{29}](#) Second, even if the text said that Christ kissed Mary on her mouth, it wouldn’t necessarily mean that something sexual is in view. Most scholars agree that Gnostic texts contain a lot of symbolism. To read such texts literally, therefore, is to misread them. Finally, regardless of the author’s intention, this Gospel wasn’t written until the second half of the third century, over two hundred years after the time of Jesus.[{30}](#) So the reference to Jesus kissing Mary is almost certainly not historically reliable.

We must show our non-Christian friends that The Gospel of Philip offers insufficient evidence that Jesus was married. But what if they’ve bought into the novel’s contention that it

would have been odd for Jesus to be single?

## Was Jesus Married? (Part 2)

The two most educated characters in *The Da Vinci Code* claim that an unmarried Jesus is quite improbable. Leigh Teabing says, “Jesus as a married man makes infinitely more sense than our standard biblical view of Jesus as a bachelor” (245). Robert Langdon, Harvard professor of Religious Symbolology, concurs:

Jesus was a Jew, and the social decorum during that time virtually forbid a Jewish man to be unmarried. According to Jewish custom, celibacy was condemned. . . . If Jesus were not married, at least one of the Bible’s Gospels would have mentioned it and offered some explanation for His unnatural state of bachelorhood (245).

Is this true? What if our non-Christian friends want a response to such claims?

In his excellent book *Breaking The Da Vinci Code*, Darrell Bock persuasively argues that an unmarried Jesus is not at all improbable.[\[31\]](#) Of course, it’s certainly true that most Jewish men of Jesus’ day did marry. It’s also true that marriage was often viewed as a fundamental human obligation, especially in light of God’s command to “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth” (Gen. 1:28). Nevertheless, by the first century there were recognized, and even lauded, exceptions to this general rule.

The first century Jewish writer, Philo of Alexandria, described the Essenes as those who “repudiate marriage . . . for no one of the Essenes ever marries a wife.”[\[32\]](#) Interestingly, the Essenes not only escaped condemnation for their celibacy, they were often admired. Philo also wrote, “This now is the enviable system of life of these Essenes, so that not only private individuals but even mighty kings,



admiring the men, venerate their sect, and increase . . . the honors which they confer on them.”[\[33\]](#) Such citations clearly reveal that not all Jews of Jesus’ day considered marriage obligatory. And those who sought to avoid marriage for religious reasons were often admired rather than condemned.

It may be helpful to remind your friend that the Bible nowhere condemns singleness. Indeed, it praises those who choose to remain single to devote themselves to the work of the Lord (e.g. 1 Cor. 7:25-38). Point your friend to Matthew 19:12, where Jesus explains that some people “have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven” (NIV). Notice His conclusion, “The one who can accept this should accept it.” It’s virtually certain that Jesus had accepted this. He had renounced marriage to fully devote Himself to the work of His heavenly Father. What’s more, since there was precedent in the first century for Jewish men to remain single for religious reasons, Jesus’ singleness would not have been condemned. Let your friend know that, contrary to the claims of *The Da Vinci Code*, it would have been completely acceptable for Jesus to be unmarried.

## **Did Jesus’ Earliest Followers Proclaim His Deity?**

We’ve considered *The Da Vinci Code*’s claim that Jesus was married and found it wanting. Mark Roberts observed “that most proponents of the marriage of Jesus thesis have an agenda. They are trying to strip Jesus of his uniqueness, and especially his deity.”[\[34\]](#) This is certainly true of *The Da Vinci Code*. Not only does it call into question Jesus’ deity by alleging that He was married, it also maintains that His earliest followers never even believed He was divine! According to Teabing, the doctrine of Christ’s deity originally resulted from a vote at the Council of Nicaea. He further asserts, “until that moment in history, Jesus was



viewed by His followers as a mortal prophet . . . a great and powerful man, but a man nonetheless" (233). Did Jesus' earliest followers really believe that He was just a man? If our non-Christian friends have questions about this, let's view it as a great opportunity to tell them who Jesus really is!

The Council of Nicaea met in A.D. 325. By then, Jesus' followers had been proclaiming His deity for nearly three centuries. Our earliest written sources about the life of Jesus are found in the New Testament. These first century documents repeatedly affirm the deity of Christ. For instance, in his letter to the Colossians, the apostle Paul declared, "For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form" (2:9; see also Rom. 9:5; Phil. 2:5-11; Tit. 2:13). And John wrote, "In the beginning was the Word . . . and the Word was God . . . And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us" (1:1, 14).

There are also affirmations of Jesus' deity in the writings of the pre-Nicene church fathers. In the early second century, Ignatius of Antioch wrote of "our God, Jesus the Christ."[\[35\]](#) Similar affirmations can be found throughout these writings. There's even non-Christian testimony from the second century that Christians believed in Christ's divinity. Pliny the Younger wrote to Emperor Trajan, around A.D. 112, that the early Christians "were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day . . . when they sang . . . a hymn to Christ, as to a god."[\[36\]](#)

If we humbly share this information with our non-Christian friends, we can help them see that Christians believed in Christ's deity long before the Council of Nicaea. We might even be able to explain why Christians were so convinced of His deity that they were willing to die rather than deny it. If so, we can invite our friends to believe in Jesus for themselves. "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).

If you want your church to be equipped to take advantage of such opportunities, consider our new study series, *Redeeming The Da Vinci Code*, available at [Probe.org](http://Probe.org).

## Notes

1. Read more about it at [http://www.filmrot.com/articles/filmrot\\_news/004089.php](http://www.filmrot.com/articles/filmrot_news/004089.php) (January 15, 2004).
2. Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 1.
3. For example, see Sandra Miesel, "Dismantling the Da Vinci Code," at <http://www.crisismagazine.com/september2003/feature1.htm> and James Patrick Holding, "Not InDavincible: A Review and Critique of The Da Vinci Code," at <http://www.answers.org/issues/davincicode.html>.
4. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (Reprint. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1952), 1:549, cited in Norman Geisler and William Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible: Revised and Expanded* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 282.
5. For more information see Geisler and Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, 390.
6. Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1998), 25.
7. Ibid., 39-40.
8. Ibid., 40.
9. Darrell Bock, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code* (n.p.: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2004), 52 (pre-publication manuscript copy).
10. Ibid., 62-63. See also *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter and The Second Treatise of the Great Seth* in Bart Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It Into The New Testament*, (New York: Oxford University Press,

2003), 78-86.

11. For example, The Coptic Gospel of Thomas (saying 1), in Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures*, 20.
12. Bock, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code*, 63.
13. Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: Christian Scriptures and the Battles Over Authentication* (Chantilly, Virginia: The Teaching Company: Course Guidebook, part 2, 2002), 37.
14. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures*, 341.
15. F.F. Bruce, "Canon," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, eds. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 95.
16. Ibid., 95-96.
17. Ibid., 96.
18. Darrell Bock, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code* (n.p. Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2004), 25-26 (pre-publication manuscript copy). I have relied heavily on Dr. Bock's analysis in this section.
19. Ibid., 116-17.
20. Bart Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It Into The New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 35.
21. Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003). On page 247 we read, "Sophie had not known a gospel existed in Magdalene's words."
22. An "apostle" can simply refer to "one sent" as an envoy or messenger. Mary was an "apostle" in this sense, since she was sent by Jesus to tell the disciples of His resurrection.
23. For more information see Bock, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code*, 16-18.
24. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures*, 19.
25. Bock, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code*, 22.
26. Ibid., 21.
27. Ibid., 20.
28. In this section I have relied heavily on chapter 3 of

Dr. Bock's book, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code*, pp. 40-49 (pre-publication copy).

29. Philo, *Hypothetica*, 11.14-17, cited in Bock, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code*, 43.
30. *Ibid.*, 44.
31. Mark D. Roberts, "Was Jesus Married? A Careful Look at the Real Evidence," at <http://www.markdroberts.com/htmfiles/resources/jesusmarried.htm>, January, 2004.
32. Ignatius of Antioch, "Ephesians," 18:2, cited in Jack N. Sparks, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. Robert M. Grant (New York: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1978), 83.
33. Pliny, *Letters*, transl. by William Melmoth, rev. by W.M.L. Hutchinson (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1935), vol. II, X:96, cited in Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 199.

© 2006 Probe Ministries

---

## The Council of Nicea

*Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims point to the influence of the Emperor Constantine on the Council of Nicea in AD 325 and argue that the secular government of Rome imposed the doctrine of the Trinity on the Christian church. In reality, church leaders were too resilient for such a simple conclusion, and Constantine's role more complex than is often presented.*

*This article is also available in [Spanish](#). *

The doctrine of the Trinity is central to the uniqueness of Christianity. It holds that the Bible teaches that "God eternally exists as three persons, Father, Son, and Holy

Spirit, and each person is fully God, and there is one God.”[\[1\]](#) So central is this belief that it is woven into the words Jesus gave the church in His Great Commission, telling believers to “ . . . go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .” (Matthew 28:19).

It is not surprising, then, that the doctrine of the Trinity is one of the most denigrated and attacked beliefs by those outside the Christian faith. Both Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses reject this central tenet and expend considerable energy teaching against it. Much of the instruction of the Jehovah’s Witness movement tries to convince others that Jesus Christ is a created being, not having existed in eternity past with the Father, and not fully God. Mormons have no problem with Jesus being God; in fact, they make godhood available to all who follow the teachings of the Church of Latter-day Saints. One Mormon scholar argues that there are *three* separate Gods—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who are one in purpose and in some way still one God.[\[2\]](#) Another writes, “The concept that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are one God is totally incomprehensible.”[\[3\]](#)

Among the world religions, Islam specifically teaches against the Trinity. Chapter four of the Koran argues, “Say not ‘Trinity’: desist: it will be better for you: for Allah is One God: glory be to Him: (far Exalted is He) above having a son” (4:171). Although Muhammad seems to have wrongly believed that Christians taught that the Trinity consisted of God the Father, Mary the Mother, and Jesus the Son, they reject as sinful anything being made equivalent with Allah, especially Jesus.

A common criticism by those who reject the doctrine of the Trinity is that the doctrine was not part of the early church, nor a conscious teaching of Jesus Himself, but was imposed on the church by the Emperor Constantine in the early fourth century at the Council of Nicea. Mormons argue that components

of Constantine's pagan thought and Greek philosophy were forced on the bishops who assembled in Nicea (located in present day Turkey). Jehovah's Witnesses believe that the Emperor weighed in against their view, which was the position argued by Arius at the council, and, again, forced the church to follow.

In the remaining portions of this article, we will discuss the impact the three key individuals—Arius, Constantine, and Athanasius—had on the Council of Nicea. We will also respond to the charge that the doctrine of the Trinity was the result of political pressure rather than of thoughtful deliberation on Scripture by a group of committed Christian leaders.

## Arius

Let's look first at the instigator of the conflict that resulted in the council, a man named Arius.

Arius was a popular preacher and presbyter from Libya who was given pastoral duties at Baucalis, in Alexandria, Egypt. The controversy began as a disagreement between Arius and his bishop, Alexander, in 318 A.D. Their differences centered on how to express the Christian understanding of God using current philosophical language. This issue had become important because of various heretical views of Jesus that had crept into the church in the late second and early third centuries. The use of philosophical language to describe theological realities has been common throughout the church age in an attempt to precisely describe what had been revealed in Scripture.

Alexander argued that Scripture presented God the Father and Jesus as having an equally eternal nature. Arius felt that Alexander's comments supported a heretical view of God called Sabellianism which taught that the Son was merely a different mode of the Father rather than a different person. Jehovah's

Witnesses argue today that the position held by Arius was superior to that of Alexander's.

Although some historians believe that the true nature of the original argument has been clouded by time and bias, the dispute became so divisive that it caught the attention of Emperor Constantine. Constantine brought the leaders of the church together for the first ecumenical council in an attempt to end the controversy.

It should be said that both sides of this debate held to a high view of Jesus and both used the Bible as their authority on the issue. Some have even argued that the controversy would never have caused such dissension were it not inflamed by political infighting within the church and different understandings of terms used in the debate.

Arius was charged with holding the view that Jesus was not just subordinate to the Father in function, but that He was of an inferior substance in a metaphysical sense as well. This went too far for Athanasius and others who were fearful that any language that degraded the full deity of Christ might place in question His role as savior and Lord.

Some believe that the position of Arius was less radical than is often perceived today. Stuart Hall writes, "Arius felt that the only way to secure the deity of Christ was to set him on the step immediately below the Father, who remained beyond all comprehension."[\[4\]](#) He adds that whatever the differences were between the two sides, "Both parties understood the face of God as graciously revealed in Jesus Christ."[\[5\]](#)

## **Emperor Constantine**

Many who oppose the doctrine of the Trinity insist that the emperor, Constantine, imposed it on the early church in 325 A.D. Because of his important role in assembling church leaders at Nicea, it might be helpful to take a closer look at

Constantine and his relationship with the church.

Constantine rose to supreme power in the Roman Empire in 306 A.D. through alliance-making and assassination when necessary. It was under Constantine's Edict of Milan in 313 A.D. that persecution of the church ended and confiscated church properties were returned.

However, the nature of Constantine's relationship to the Christian faith is a complex one. He believed that God should be appeased with correct worship, and he encouraged the idea among Christians that he "served their God."[\[6\]](#) It seems that Constantine's involvement with the church centered on his hope that it could become a source of unity for the troubled empire. He was not so much interested in the finer details of doctrine as in ending the strife that was caused by religious disagreements. He wrote in a letter, "My design then was, first, to bring the diverse judgments found by all nations respecting the Deity to a condition, as it were, of settled uniformity; and, second to restore a healthy tone to the system of the world . . ."[\[7\]](#) This resulted in him supporting various sides of theological issues depending on which side might help peace to prevail. Constantine was eventually baptized shortly before his death, but his commitment to the Christian faith is a matter of debate.

Constantine participated in and enhanced a recently established tradition of Roman emperors meddling in church affairs. In the early church, persecution was the general policy. In 272, Aurelian removed Paul of Samosata from his church in Antioch because of a theological controversy. Before the conflict over Arius, Constantine had called a small church synod to resolve the conflict caused by the Donatists who argued for the removal of priests who gave up sacred writings during times of persecution. The Donatists were rebuked by the church synod. Constantine spent five years trying to suppress their movement by force, but eventually gave up in frustration.



Then, the Arian controversy over the nature of Jesus was brought to his attention. It would be a complex debate because both sides held Jesus in high regard and both sides appealed to Scripture to defend their position. To settle the issue, Constantine called the council at Nicea in 325 A.D. with church leaders mainly from the East participating. Consistent with his desire for unity, in years to come Constantine would vacillate from supporting one theological side to the other if he thought it might end the debate.

What is clear is that Constantine's active role in attempting to resolve church disputes would be the beginning of a new relationship between the empire and the church.

## Athanasius

The Council of Nicea convened on May 20, 325 A.D. The 230 church leaders were there to consider a question vital to the church: Was Jesus Christ equal to God the Father or was he something else? Athanasius, only in his twenties, came to the council to fight for the idea that, "If Christ were not truly God, then he could not bestow life upon the repentant and free them from sin and death." [\[8\]](#) He led those who opposed the teachings of Arius who argued that Jesus was not of the same substance as the Father.

The Nicene Creed, in its entirety, affirmed belief ". . . in one God, the Father almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man; he suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. And in the Holy Ghost." [\[9\]](#)

The council acknowledged that Christ was God of very God. Although the Father and Son differed in role, they, and the Holy Spirit are truly God. More specifically, Christ is of one substance with the Father. The Greek word *homoousios* was used to describe this sameness. The term was controversial because it is not used in the Bible. Some preferred a different word that conveyed *similarity* rather than *sameness*. But Athanasius and the near unanimous majority of bishops felt that this might eventually result in a lowering of Christ's oneness with the Father. They also argued that Christ was begotten, not made. He is not a created thing in the same class as the rest of the cosmos. They concluded by positing that Christ became human for mankind and its salvation. The council was unanimous in its condemnation of Arius and his teachings. It also removed two Libyan bishops who refused to accept the creed formulated by the Council.

The growing entanglement of the Roman emperors with the church during the fourth century was often less than beneficial. But rather than Athanasius and his supporters seeking the backing of imperial power, it was the Arians who actually were in favor of the Emperor having the last word.

## Summary

Did Constantine impose the doctrine of the Trinity on the church? Let's respond to a few of the arguments used in support of that belief.

First, the doctrine of the Trinity was a widely held belief prior to the Council of Nicea. Since baptism is a universal act of obedience for new believers, it is significant that Jesus uses Trinitarian language in Matthew 28:19 when He gives the Great Commission to make disciples and baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The *Didache*, an early manual of church life, also included the Trinitarian language for baptism. It was written in either the late first or early

second century after Christ. We find Trinitarian language again being used by Hippolytus around 200 A.D. in a formula used to question those about to be baptized. New believers were to be asked to affirm belief in God the Father, Christ Jesus the Son of God, and the Holy Spirit.

Second, the Roman government didn't consistently support Trinitarian theology or its ardent apologist, Athanasius. Constantine flip-flopped in his support for Athanasius because he was more concerned about keeping the peace than in theology itself. He exiled Athanasius in 335 and was about to reinstate Arius just prior to his death. During the forty-five years that Athanasius was Bishop of Alexandria in Egypt, he was banished into exile five times by various Roman Emperors.

In fact, later emperors forced an Arian view on the church in a much more direct way than Constantine supported the Trinitarian view. Emperors Constantius II and Julian banished Athanasius and imposed Arianism on the empire. The emperor Constantius is reported to have said, "Let whatsoever I will, be that esteemed a canon," equating his words with the authority of the church councils.<sup>{10}</sup> Arians in general "tended to favor direct imperial control of the church."<sup>{11}</sup>

Finally, the bishops who attended the Council of Nicea were far too independent and toughened by persecution and martyrdom to give in so easily to a doctrine they didn't agree with. As we have already mentioned, many of these bishops were banished by emperors supporting the Arian view and yet held on to their convictions. Also, the Council at Constantinople in 381 reaffirmed the Trinitarian position after Constantine died. If the church had temporarily succumbed to Constantine's influence, it could have rejected the doctrine at this later council.

Possessing the freedom to call an ecumenical council after the Edict of Milan in 313, significant numbers of bishops and church leaders met to consider the different views about the

person of Christ and the nature of God. The result was the doctrine of the Trinity that Christians have held and taught for over sixteen centuries.

## Notes

1. Grudem, Wayne, *Bible Doctrine* (Zondervan, 1999), p. 104.
2. Blomberg, Craig L., & Robinson, Stephen E., *How Wide the Divide*, (InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 128.
3. Bruce McConkie in *Mormonism 101* by Bill McKeever & Eric Johnson (Baker Books, 2000), p. 52.
4. Hall, Stuart G., *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church*, (Eerdmans, 1991), p. 135.
5. Ibid.
6. Hall, Stuart G., *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church*, p. 118.
7. Noll, Mark, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*, (InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 51.
8. Ibid., 55.
9. Ibid., 57.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 60.

© 2003 Probe Ministries.

---

# The Council of Nicea and the Doctrine of the Trinity

*Don Closson argues that Constantine did not impose the doctrine of the Trinity on the church, demonstrating the actual role of church leaders and Constantine.*

*This article is also available in [Spanish](#).*



The doctrine of the Trinity is central to the uniqueness of Christianity. It holds that the Bible teaches that “God eternally exists as three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and each person is fully God, and there is one God.”[\[1\]](#) So central is this belief that it is woven into the words Jesus gave the church in His Great Commission, telling believers to “ . . . go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .” (Matthew 28:19).

It is not surprising, then, that the doctrine of the Trinity is one of the most denigrated and attacked beliefs by those outside the Christian faith. Both Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses reject this central tenet and expend considerable energy teaching against it. Much of the instruction of the Jehovah’s Witness movement tries to convince others that Jesus Christ is a created being, not having existed in eternity past with the Father, and not fully God. Mormons have no problem with Jesus being God; in fact, they make godhood available to all who follow the teachings of the Church of Latter-day Saints. One Mormon scholar argues that there are *three* separate Gods—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who are one in purpose and in some way still one God.[\[2\]](#) Another writes, “The concept that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are one God is totally incomprehensible.”[\[3\]](#)

Among the world religions, Islam specifically teaches against the Trinity. Chapter four of the Koran argues, “Say not ‘Trinity’: desist: it will be better for you: for Allah is One God: glory be to Him: (far Exalted is He) above having a son” (4:171). Although Muhammad seems to have wrongly believed that Christians taught that the Trinity consisted of God the Father, Mary the Mother, and Jesus the Son, they reject as sinful anything being made equivalent with Allah, especially Jesus.

A common criticism by those who reject the doctrine of the Trinity is that the doctrine was not part of the early church,

nor a conscious teaching of Jesus Himself, but was imposed on the church by the Emperor Constantine in the early fourth century at the Council of Nicea. Mormons argue that components of Constantine's pagan thought and Greek philosophy were forced on the bishops who assembled in Nicea (located in present day Turkey). Jehovah's Witnesses believe that the Emperor weighed in against their view, which was the position argued by Arius at the council, and, again, forced the church to follow.

In the remaining portions of this article, we will discuss the impact the three key individuals—Arius, Constantine, and Athanasius—had on the Council of Nicea. We will also respond to the charge that the doctrine of the Trinity was the result of political pressure rather than of thoughtful deliberation on Scripture by a group of committed Christian leaders.

## Arius

Let's look first at the instigator of the conflict that resulted in the council, a man named Arius.

Arius was a popular preacher and presbyter from Libya who was given pastoral duties at Baucalis, in Alexandria, Egypt. The controversy began as a disagreement between Arius and his bishop, Alexander, in 318 A.D. Their differences centered on how to express the Christian understanding of God using current philosophical language. This issue had become important because of various heretical views of Jesus that had crept into the church in the late second and early third centuries. The use of philosophical language to describe theological realities has been common throughout the church age in an attempt to precisely describe what had been revealed in Scripture.

Alexander argued that Scripture presented God the Father and Jesus as having an equally eternal nature. Arius felt that

Alexander's comments supported a heretical view of God called Sabellianism which taught that the Son was merely a different mode of the Father rather than a different person. Jehovah's Witnesses argue today that the position held by Arius was superior to that of Alexander's.

Although some historians believe that the true nature of the original argument has been clouded by time and bias, the dispute became so divisive that it caught the attention of Emperor Constantine. Constantine brought the leaders of the church together for the first ecumenical council in an attempt to end the controversy.

It should be said that both sides of this debate held to a high view of Jesus and both used the Bible as their authority on the issue. Some have even argued that the controversy would never have caused such dissension were it not inflamed by political infighting within the church and different understandings of terms used in the debate.

Arius was charged with holding the view that Jesus was not just subordinate to the Father in function, but that He was of an inferior substance in a metaphysical sense as well. This went too far for Athanasius and others who were fearful that any language that degraded the full deity of Christ might place in question His role as savior and Lord.

Some believe that the position of Arius was less radical than is often perceived today. Stuart Hall writes, "Arius felt that the only way to secure the deity of Christ was to set him on the step immediately below the Father, who remained beyond all comprehension."[\[4\]](#) He adds that whatever the differences were between the two sides, "Both parties understood the face of God as graciously revealed in Jesus Christ."[\[5\]](#)

# Emperor Constantine

Many who oppose the doctrine of the Trinity insist that the emperor, Constantine, imposed it on the early church in 325 A.D. Because of his important role in assembling church leaders at Nicea, it might be helpful to take a closer look at Constantine and his relationship with the church.

Constantine rose to supreme power in the Roman Empire in 306 A.D. through alliance-making and assassination when necessary. It was under Constantine's Edict of Milan in 313 A.D. that persecution of the church ended and confiscated church properties were returned.

However, the nature of Constantine's relationship to the Christian faith is a complex one. He believed that God should be appeased with correct worship, and he encouraged the idea among Christians that he "served their God."[\[6\]](#) It seems that Constantine's involvement with the church centered on his hope that it could become a source of unity for the troubled empire. He was not so much interested in the finer details of doctrine as in ending the strife that was caused by religious disagreements. He wrote in a letter, "My design then was, first, to bring the diverse judgments found by all nations respecting the Deity to a condition, as it were, of settled uniformity; and, second to restore a healthy tone to the system of the world . . ."[\[7\]](#) This resulted in him supporting various sides of theological issues depending on which side might help peace to prevail. Constantine was eventually baptized shortly before his death, but his commitment to the Christian faith is a matter of debate.

Constantine participated in and enhanced a recently established tradition of Roman emperors meddling in church affairs. In the early church, persecution was the general policy. In 272, Aurelian removed Paul of Samosata from his church in Antioch because of a theological controversy. Before the conflict over Arius, Constantine had called a small church



synod to resolve the conflict caused by the Donatists who argued for the removal of priests who gave up sacred writings during times of persecution. The Donatists were rebuked by the church synod. Constantine spent five years trying to suppress their movement by force, but eventually gave up in frustration.

Then, the Arian controversy over the nature of Jesus was brought to his attention. It would be a complex debate because both sides held Jesus in high regard and both sides appealed to Scripture to defend their position. To settle the issue, Constantine called the council at Nicea in 325 A.D. with church leaders mainly from the East participating. Consistent with his desire for unity, in years to come Constantine would vacillate from supporting one theological side to the other if he thought it might end the debate.

What is clear is that Constantine's active role in attempting to resolve church disputes would be the beginning of a new relationship between the empire and the church.

## Athanasius

The Council of Nicea convened on May 20, 325 A.D. The 230 church leaders were there to consider a question vital to the church: Was Jesus Christ equal to God the Father or was he something else? Athanasius, only in his twenties, came to the council to fight for the idea that, "If Christ were not truly God, then he could not bestow life upon the repentant and free them from sin and death."[\[8\]](#) He led those who opposed the teachings of Arius who argued that Jesus was not of the same substance as the Father.

The Nicene Creed, in its entirety, affirmed belief ". . . in one God, the Father almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, Light of Light, very God of very God,

begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man; he suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. And in the Holy Ghost." [\[9\]](#)

The council acknowledged that Christ was God of very God. Although the Father and Son differed in role, they, and the Holy Spirit are truly God. More specifically, Christ is of one substance with the Father. The Greek word *homoousios* was used to describe this sameness. The term was controversial because it is not used in the Bible. Some preferred a different word that conveyed *similarity* rather than *sameness*. But Athanasius and the near unanimous majority of bishops felt that this might eventually result in a lowering of Christ's oneness with the Father. They also argued that Christ was begotten, not made. He is not a created thing in the same class as the rest of the cosmos. They concluded by positing that Christ became human for mankind and its salvation. The council was unanimous in its condemnation of Arius and his teachings. It also removed two Libyan bishops who refused to accept the creed formulated by the Council.

The growing entanglement of the Roman emperors with the church during the fourth century was often less than beneficial. But rather than Athanasius and his supporters seeking the backing of imperial power, it was the Arians who actually were in favor of the Emperor having the last word.

## Summary

Did Constantine impose the doctrine of the Trinity on the church? Let's respond to a few of the arguments used in support of that belief.

First, the doctrine of the Trinity was a widely held belief

prior to the Council of Nicea. Since baptism is a universal act of obedience for new believers, it is significant that Jesus uses Trinitarian language in Matthew 28:19 when He gives the Great Commission to make disciples and baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The *Didache*, an early manual of church life, also included the Trinitarian language for baptism. It was written in either the late first or early second century after Christ. We find Trinitarian language again being used by Hippolytus around 200 A.D. in a formula used to question those about to be baptized. New believers were to asked to affirm belief in God the Father, Christ Jesus the Son of God, and the Holy Spirit.

Second, the Roman government didn't consistently support Trinitarian theology or its ardent apologist, Athanasius. Constantine flip-flopped in his support for Athanasius because he was more concerned about keeping the peace than in theology itself. He exiled Athanasius in 335 and was about to reinstate Arius just prior to his death. During the forty-five years that Athanasius was Bishop of Alexandria in Egypt, he was banished into exile five times by various Roman Emperors.

In fact, later emperors forced an Arian view on the church in a much more direct way than Constantine supported the Trinitarian view. Emperors Constantius II and Julian banished Athanasius and imposed Arianism on the empire. The emperor Constantius is reported to have said, "Let whatsoever I will, be that esteemed a canon," equating his words with the authority of the church councils.[{10}](#) Arians in general "tended to favor direct imperial control of the church."[{11}](#)

Finally, the bishops who attended the Council of Nicea were far too independent and toughened by persecution and martyrdom to give in so easily to a doctrine they didn't agree with. As we have already mentioned, many of these bishops were banished by emperors supporting the Arian view and yet held on to their convictions. Also, the Council at Constantinople in 381 reaffirmed the Trinitarian position after Constantine died. If

the church had temporarily succumbed to Constantine's influence, it could have rejected the doctrine at this later council.

Possessing the freedom to call an ecumenical council after the Edict of Milan in 313, significant numbers of bishops and church leaders met to consider the different views about the person of Christ and the nature of God. The result was the doctrine of the Trinity that Christians have held and taught for over sixteen centuries.

## Notes

1. Grudem, Wayne, *Bible Doctrine* (Zondervan, 1999), p. 104.
2. Blomberg, Craig L., & Robinson, Stephen E., *How Wide the Divide*, (InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 128.
3. Bruce McConkie in *Mormonism 101* by Bill McKeever & Eric Johnson (Baker Books, 2000), p. 52.
4. Hall, Stuart G., *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church*, (Eerdmans, 1991), p. 135.
5. Ibid.
6. Hall, Stuart G., *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church*, p. 118.
7. Noll, Mark, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*, (InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 51.
8. Ibid., 55.
9. Ibid., 57.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 60.