Discerning Fact from Fiction:

*The Da Vinci Code* and Faith

By

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Abstract

In popular culture, there are numerous fads, trends, and scandals that come and go and cannot be remembered six months later. However, a few of these "phenomena" manage to have a greater effect and lasting power than the rest. One example of this is Dan Brown's novel, *The Da Vinci Code*. *The Da Vinci Code* has created quite the scandal with its radical claims about the Church, Church history, and religion as a whole. However, one must stop and question why this book has become so controversial. Why do people from all religious, social, and racial backgrounds take such a personal interest in the topic? Ultimately, Brown's book forces people to examine critically their personal beliefs and determine the "truth" for themselves. For my thesis, I have designed a four week course that uses Brown's controversies as a starting point to examine various religious issues on a personal level. The course will be discussion based complete with handouts, power point presentations, and my personal notes. The themes for the week are as follows: Week one, Catholicism vs. Protestantism and Brown's outrageous "facts"; Week two, the person of Jesus; Week three, the Gnostic gospels; Week four, the person of Mary Magdalene and the role of women in the Church. At the end of the course, participants should be able to stand tall in a stronger foundation of their personal beliefs.

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Rationale

Introduction to the program

When it came time to select a topic for my honors thesis, I was at an absolute loss. I had been brainstorming topics intermittently throughout the spring semester of my junior year; however, I was unable to get excited about any ideas that I generated. Then, over the summer, I saw a commercial for a TV program on the History Channel that was disproving Dan Brown’s novel, *The Da Vinci Code*. Remembering when the book was published in 2003, I recalled all of the scandal and proverbial “waves” that it had created and was astounded to realize that the effects were still rippling three years later. Therefore, I decided to do my thesis on Brown’s novel and address all of the controversial issues that it raised.

Since my thesis is the capstone for all of my hard work and time spent in the Honors College, I knew that the project would have to embody several of the elements that I had studied through my Honors courses. First of all, my humanities sequence was based on literature – so that fit perfectly. However, we also did several sections on philosophy and religion. *The Da Vinci Code* comes into play perfectly here because the main controversy created by the book dealt within the realms of religion and theology. Great. There would be much research for me to do in order to become knowledgeable about the topic, and I don’t think that I have ever taken an Honors class that did not involve some kind of research project. Another element in place. However, the biggest reason that my thesis fit as a capstone project for the Honors College is because it challenged me like no other project. It challenged me to consider both sides of every issue: Was Jesus married? Was Mary Magdalene the Holy Grail? While my instinct immediately told me “No,” I had to be a scholar and investigate the other side. I had to allow what I considered to be blasphemy and heresy to become potential truths. And then, once I learned the facts (or as close to facts as I could get), I
was able to form my opinions – not based on my own instinct, but instead based on fact, research, and most importantly, truth.

Originally, I had planned to develop this capstone experience in the form of a paper that would “disprove” Brown’s theories regarding Jesus’ role/purpose on earth, as well as the role of Mary Magdalene, and the other Biblical issues that he attacks. However, after meeting with my advisor, Dr. Susan Yanos, she suggested that I create a “program” about The Da Vinci Code to teach at my church (College Park Church in Indianapolis) instead. She had just taught one at her own church; so naturally, she became a great reference in addition to being my advisor. After she gave me the magazine article that inspired her to teach the class, “Krispy Kremes and ‘The Da Vinci Code’” by Jim McDermott, from the magazine America, I better understood why a program was more appropriate than a paper.

The reason that teaching a class would be more effective than writing a paper is that according to McDermott, “…people’s interest bespeaks a great hunger for conversation about the church and their own lived experience of the faith.” People don’t want to read about why The Da Vinci Code is wrong; they want to talk about it! Therefore, as Dr. Yanos suggested, the book becomes a starting point for a very in-depth and exploratory theological conversation.

I liked this approach much better than writing a paper. First of all, I always procrastinate on papers, and the idea of procrastinating on a very important paper, such as a thesis, did not sound like a good idea. Plus, it would involve a lot of research that would merely turn into regurgitation of someone else’s work, and I enjoy being able to express my own thoughts and opinions. Therefore, a chance to facilitate a program that would be entirely discussion based on very controversial issues sounded like the correct route to take. It would enable me to use all of the information that I had gathered during my research stages, but I wouldn’t be presenting it in a boring format that stifled interaction with the audience. Also, it took a lot of the pressure off me to be an “expert.” My
greatest fear would be that after a semester of research and analysis that someone would ask me a question that I could not answer. Then, I would feel like a failure and that all of my efforts had been in vain. With the discussion format, I can participate in the discussion, and it is all right for me to say, “I don’t know” or “there is no right/wrong answer.” I can help people learn for themselves rather than force feeding them massive amounts of information. Plus, they can teach me as well! I love thinking about issues from different perspectives and hearing about others’ experiences.

The beautiful thing about this program is that anyone can attend regardless of whether or not they have read the book; it is a discussion of religious ideas and principles and NOT a book discussion. After all, the main issue is not about the novel but about the questions that Brown’s work raises regarding church, religion, and faith. We will discuss the plot to some extent, just to give everyone a foundation in the material; however, the focus will be on the issues. To further promote attendance and participation, there will be no assigned reading since having major assignments might be a deterrent to some people from attending the sessions.

Another way to facilitate the discussion and create an enjoyable atmosphere for everyone is to have small and large group discussions throughout the series. For example, I have some handouts that will be distributed for attendees to look at/discuss in small groups. Then, when we reconvene, we will review the small groups’ discussions to see if there are any differing opinions between/within groups. This will enable people who are shy to speak up in a smaller setting and those who are more comfortable to speak in front of the entire group. It will also allow more interaction between attendees and hopefully promote more personal, meaningful, and in-depth discussions.

Luckily, since Dr. Yanos had already facilitated a class like this, she was able to help me when it came time to do research by suggesting several books by various authors that would be appropriate sources. I read the books and took extensive notes that related to the issues to be
discussed in the course. Some of these notes just served as background so that I could be more knowledgeable about the history and topic while other notes generated discussion questions and ideas for group activities during the program.

In order to tailor the program to my church, I had a meeting with Joe Bartemus who is in charge of adult education at College Park. He gave me some information about programs and classes that he had taught and reaffirmed my suspicions that the College Park congregation was very involved, full of questions, and always ready to learn and discuss. After that advice, he proceeded to go through the church’s mission statement and overall doctrine and explain them to me so that I would be prepared to represent the church accurately in my program. This was also very beneficial to me on a personal level because I had only been attending the church for three months, so it not only prepared me for the discussions to come but also gave me a better understanding of the church itself.

Another key element in this research process was Dr. Yanos, herself. While she was supposed to serve as my advisor, she was still my teacher. She taught me so many things and served as my personal facilitator so that I had countless “light bulb” moments while sitting in her office and talking about the project. She helped me see that perhaps Jesus didn’t explain parables to everyone because he wanted to challenge them so that first they would think on their own and then become open to his teachings. She also helped me interpret the Gnostic gospels and derive a greater meaning from them than what I had done on my own. Most importantly, however, she spent lots of time going through the Catholic Catechism with me and explaining the Church’s position on the various points that I wanted to discuss during the first night of the program. Without her help, none of that portion of my project would have been possible.

So, I designed the course around the following topics based on Brown's themes and McDermott's suggestions: truth, the person of Jesus, knowledge, and the role of women in the
Church. These topics then manifested into four weeks' worth of course work: Catholicism vs. Protestantism and Brown's outrageous "facts," the person of Jesus, the Gnostic gospels, and the person of Mary Magdalene and role of women in the Church.

I expect the demographic/audience for this series to be very diverse. College Park is a very large church with an average attendance of 2,000 – 3,000 every Sunday. They also have a large adult ministries program, so I believe that there will be a great deal of interest from adults in my discussions. However, since The Da Vinci Code has become so controversial and been in the news frequently, I expect to see a younger generation there as well: high school, college, and young professionals. All attendees will probably have a desire for learning and be scholarly in many aspects as this has become a very intellectual topic.

If I had to guess, I would imagine that the established adults and retired attendees would be there to disprove the book while the students would be there to discuss openly and eagerly the controversy. In telling people about my thesis, I have discovered that adults generally tend to be very leery when I explain it, and they always ask, "You're going to disprove it, right?" whereas younger generations appear to be more tolerant, overall, and interested in hearing both sides of the story. It will be one of my personal surprises to see just exactly how the various demographics respond to the material, though.

Initially, I plan to try the course on a small "test group" before offering it to the entire church. Since I have no teaching experience, I cannot predict the flow/outcome of the discussion sessions, and this can be a problem when it comes to planning and keeping on schedule. Dr. Yanos gave me lots of advice when it came to controlling a large discussion, and she even forewarned me about how some of the questions I was asking would affect the whole discussion series. Therefore, by trying the course out on a smaller group of friends and family, I will be able to get a feel for how the program might flow and some of the questions and problems that may arise. It would almost be
like a practice run for me, and I know that I would receive honest and constructive critiques from my friends and family.

Ultimately, my goal is to provide an open, scholarly environment for people to discuss their faith and postulate about any issues or concerns that they have relating to their faith. People should be able to speak freely and not worry about giving the “cookie cutter” Christian answers. They need to understand that it is perfectly all right to question their faith and work out the answers for themselves. In saying that, there is a Bible verse that fits the theme of this course. As Paul writes to the Philippians (2:12):

*Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only in my presence, but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling...*(ESV)

**The Agendas**

The weekly formatting for the program will follow a similar pattern each week. I have outlined objectives in my personal notes for each week to determine goals and the focus of discussions. First, we will always open with prayer to ask God to bless our discussion and let it give glory to Him through our discovering of His word, His will, and His truths, followed by a scripture reading that serves as an introduction to the material. Then we will move to some preliminary discussion questions that establish individuals’ current beliefs and start opening their minds to hearing additional information on the topic we are studying. After these questions, we will move into the activity for the evening. Typically this will involve breaking into smaller groups and working on a worksheet or looking up and discussing scripture. Then, we will reconvene into the large group and discuss our findings. After this, I might ask some additional questions or raise additional points/information to make sure that the weekly objectives are met and attendees leave with a greater knowledge and understanding. It is important to close each week with a prayer to
thank God for our time together and touch upon the evening’s discussions. Finally, I will end the evening with a preview question or thought for participants to mull over that provides a glimpse into the next week’s discussion topic.

The first week is entitled *Just the “Facts”* because this is the week where all of the groundwork is laid for the rest of the program. Even though participants can take the course without having read *The Da Vinci Code*, it is crucial that they understand the major plot elements that create the themes and controversies that we are discussing.

First, I will distribute a plot summary from *sparknotes.com* to the group. This way if it has been awhile since people read the book or if they have never read the book, they will be able to understand the major plot lines and see where all of Brown’s controversies come from. I will try to keep our time in plot discussion very short because, as previously stated, the program isn’t about the book, and we aren’t doing book reports. However, if people are confused over certain aspects or have interesting insights/facts/comments, then I want to be sure to share those with the group at the beginning so that everyone can start on the same playing field. At Dr. Yanos’ suggestion, I will remove the ending events of the novel from the summary in case people want to read the book later. After all, it is a good suspense story with lots of twists and turns when taken at face value, and why would I want to spoil the surprises and cliffhangers?

After discussing the major plot lines from the book, we will view a power point slideshow that contains images from key paintings, places, and things that were mentioned in the book. I am a very visual person, so seeing the images supplements my reading of the book. I’ve included the major paintings mentioned in the book as well as most of the landmarks that had major plot scenarios. Some of the main points I want to cover are in the paintings. For example, in *Madonna of the Rocks* Brown describes this picture as a very malicious and threatening painting; however, seeing the painting shows that this is not the case and that Brown is exaggerating the depiction just
to try and prove his point. Also, the ‘V’ symbol in *The Last Supper* is not as cut and dry as Brown makes it sound. There are numerous ‘V’s in the painting. Finally, the last major point that I want to make is to show the blade and chalice symbols that represent masculinity and femininity in the pyramids at the Louvre. Brown doesn’t mention them until the end of the book, but I just found it fascinating in general, so I wanted to include it. And, being the moderator of this discussion series, I am able to do that.

Next, we will start a discussion on Bart Ehrman’s “Factual Errors” as listed in the introduction of *Truth and Fiction in The Da Vinci Code*. Ehrman went through the novel and pulled several of Brown’s “facts” that he used to make his scandalous claims and then proved them false. For example, Brown claims that Constantine commissioned the Bible at the Council of Nicaea to help promote Christianity and keep him in favor with the growing Christian population. Ehrman disproves this statement by showing that Constantine wanted to hold the Council to unify Christians and reduce the extreme fighting that was taking place within his empire. However, the Council was run entirely by leaders within the Church, and the results were uninfluenced by Constantine’s personal preferences. It is important that we examine these true facts in our discussion because it is essentially disproving *The Da Vinci Code*. By showing Brown’s lack of credibility, then it helps readers start to question both his motives and the issues raised in the book. It is, essentially, a “jumping-off” point to start the discussions for the rest of the program by teaching attendees to question motives and search for their own answers and truths.

Depending on the time and interest of attendees, I have one more element planned for the first week – a discussion on the differences between Catholicism and Protestantism. This was probably my area of greatest interest within my thesis. In the past year, I had attended several masses with a friend in Muncie and with my father at home both of which presented me with exposure to the Catholic Church that I had never had before. I knew that Catholics were still
Christians, but some of their doctrine and rituals were drastically different than what I had been taught in church, so I became very curious about those differences and wanted to learn more. In reading *The Da Vinci Code*, there are elements that relate in particular to the Catholic faith, such as Opus Dei and the early church, which allowed me to start research and tie it in with the discussion.

I had a chart provided by Joe Barternus that illuminates the differences between Catholicism and Protestantism in various areas of the church (scripture, salvation, the future, etc.). Using this as a model, I made some changes to create a worksheet and power point that allow for easy comparison of the two denominations. First, I will distribute the worksheet to the large group and go through the power point and explain the Catholic positions presented there. Then, I will break the large group into smaller groups so that they can discuss their own positions on the issues and look for similarities and differences between the two denominations. Finally, everyone will come back together, and attendees will have a chance to share their mini-discussions with the rest of the group. My goal for this exercise is just to share my interest in the differences between Protestantism and Catholicism with others and help them think specifically and pointedly about their own doctrinal beliefs. Although, as I said before, if there is neither time nor interest, this portion of the program can be left out or even included in another program elsewhere within the church.

The second week is entitled *Jesus: Who Do You Say He Is?* After the opening prayer and scripture reading, we will start a very deep discussion about how people know Jesus. At first, answers will most likely be very generic such as: “My parents told me about him”; “We talked about it in Sunday school”; etc. However, I want people to tell me how they’ve experienced Jesus and times that he has spoken directly to them. After all, if children eventually stop believing in Santa Claus due to lack of evidence, interaction, and support, then adults would do the same thing with spiritual matters. Therefore, Christians must have evidence, interaction, and support with Jesus
or else they wouldn’t believe in him. I want participants to pull from their personal experiences and share them with the group.

After we establish how we know Jesus, then we want to talk about who Jesus was. Was he an inspirational speaker? A man? The savior? A prophet? I want the group to pull from scripture, instinct, and emotions to try to answer this question. The point of this is to get to know the person of Jesus better. Sometimes, as Christians, we get so caught up in the all Holy nature of Jesus that we lose sight of the fact that he was a mortal man – just like us. He didn’t live in a special bubble. He faced the same temptations, trials, and experiences as we did. So, with this question, we want to try to establish the character of Jesus.

More than likely, people will focus on the divine, perfect facet of Jesus. After all, that is how we traditionally view him: hanging on the cross without sin. Brown even raises this point in *The Da Vinci Code* when he says that the Bible was put together to hide Jesus’ humanity and only focus on his divinity. Therefore, in our discussion, we will want to look at the lesser noted side of Jesus (both for our own sake and to spite Brown) which is his human side.

To do this, I have prepared a list of passages from the book of Mark that show his very human side. Everyone will divide into small groups and look up the passages. Then they will discuss how they can see Jesus’ humanity throughout the scriptures. We will come back together, and I will show a power point with the passages and my personal comments on how they show Jesus’ humanity and disprove Brown’s accusation that the Bible is lacking examples of this.

The discussion this week will most likely be very emotional and very heartfelt. Christians are absolutely passionate about Jesus because he is what defines our religion and our future in Heaven. Without him, we would be full of sin, without God’s grace, and lacking the Holy Spirit. Therefore, I am predicting that everyone will want to talk and I am going to have to be especially
careful to keep the discussion on target so that we don’t digress into other areas relating to Jesus that don’t fit the discussion outline.

Ultimately, I want everyone to walk away with a new appreciation for Jesus and his role in Christianity. I want people to think about why his story is so reassuring and why we seek comfort and salvation through him. As Dr. Yanos pointed out, “the incarnation is a beautiful mystery,” and we can only do our best to try to understand it.

The third week will be called Knowledge: It’s What’s For . . . Salvation? In this week, we are going to examine the differences between Gnosticism and Christianity in relation to knowledge and teaching. Brown claims that the Gnostic gospels are legitimate, but were destroyed to hide evidence that Jesus was a human married to Mary Magdalene, so we must examine them to formulate our own opinions. The group will discover, as I did, that the Gnostic gospels don’t show Jesus’ humanity as Brown claims. Instead, they provide an even more confusing perspective of Jesus that is more complex than the Trinity.

One of the most frustrating claims that Brown makes is that the Gnostic Gospels were destroyed in an attempt to hide the “truth.” However, as we have been able to determine by examining history, this is another false “fact.” Yes, they were left out of the Christian New Testament at the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD but that was because they were neither used nor commonly believed by religious leaders. Rather than being “destroyed” by religious leaders in order to hide the truth, they were more-or-less “abandoned” because they did not sufficiently or accurately describe the person of Jesus. A biography would not sell copies if it contained exaggerated, confusing, or false information about the subject, so why would the Gnostic gospels be used if they did the same thing regarding the person of Jesus?
Over time, we have forgotten this aspect and since the discovery of the Gnostic gospels and Dead Sea Scrolls in the mid 1900’s, people have a renewed interest in the topic. However, without the discovery, Brown wouldn’t have written the book, and I would have a much more boring thesis!

As Christians, we believe that Jesus taught everyone to know God’s teachings (although the Old Testament had been established, the New Testament had not been written, so today we interpret this as reading the Bible in its entirety), pray, and hear the news he came to share. Gnostics, however, believe that knowledge isn’t for everyone. In the Gnostic Gospels, Jesus shares certain information with some people but not with others. He maintains that there is some secret knowledge that cannot be handed out freely, and only special, pre-selected people can receive it. Therefore, the discussion question asks about the role of knowledge within faith and whether it is intended for a special group of people or it is intended to be shared with all.

I will hand out a worksheet that briefly defines Gnosticism and shows three major differences between Christianity and Gnosticism because, most likely, the attendees will be unfamiliar with the details and beliefs of Gnosticism. Then, everyone will break into small groups to work on the worksheet. It provides examples from the Bible, Gnostic texts, ancient theologians, and today’s scholars all relating to the role of knowledge within religion.

For example, the first question asks why Jesus always spoke in parables to the crowds, but never explained their meaning. Instead, he would explain it to the disciples when they asked him about the importance of the stories. While some people might interpret this as Jesus purposely withholding information from the masses and only sharing it with a select few (the Gnostic way), Jesus is actually testing the crowds. He wants them to learn to think for themselves and be open to learning. If they decide that they are, in fact, open to receive his teachings, then he will enlighten them. Thus, Jesus teaches/gives knowledge to everyone, but first, they must open their hearts to hear the message.
All of these questions are designed to push the envelope and almost take participants out of their comfort zone when it comes to discussing some of these touchier religious issues (like Jesus’ teachings). Ultimately, they need to find the similarities and differences between Gnosticism and Christianity and be able to prove that, as Christians, we are right in our beliefs about knowledge in religion. We want to show how Brown has misrepresented Gnosticism and further prove that our Christian beliefs regarding Christ and his teachings are true. After all, we need to be able to prove and solidify the building blocks of our faith.

The fourth and final week is entitled *Mary, Mary Quite Contrary* because it looks at the role of Mary Magdalene in the Bible and Jesus’ life to counter Brown’s claim that Mary was Jesus’ wife. The Bible is open to many different interpretations, and we can see this as different Christian denominations and Churches embrace or emphasize these facets of Mary’s personality. The challenge during this session is to determine which interpretation of Mary is the most powerful to us as members of the church. Also, we will examine the origins of the Mary/Jesus scandal by examining some of the Gnostic texts that may or may not prove this. After all the discussion of Mary and her supposed marriage to Jesus, we will transition to talk about women’s role in the church today.

The question that will be burning in all participants’ minds is, “Were Jesus and Mary actually married, and did Mary carry on His bloodline?” While scripture neither proves nor disproves his marriage, I will open the floor and ask attendees if it personally matters to them whether or not Jesus was married at the time of the crucifixion. At first, I anticipate that this will cause quite a commotion, especially among those people who haven’t read the book. However, it is my personal hope that people will be open-minded and truly consider that it wouldn’t matter if Jesus was married. When Dr. Yanos held her discussion series, they came to this conclusion as well. Personally, I believe that Jesus was simultaneously human and divine, and he lived a sinless life.
performing miracles and teaching Christianity wherever he went. Therefore, a trivial detail such as his marital status isn’t of great concern to me.

After discussing Jesus and Mary’s relationship, I will break the group into smaller groups to look at three different perspectives of Mary Magdalene’s character according to three different religions. According to the Western/traditional view, Mary was a prostitute who was forgiven by Jesus and became one of the great Biblical personalities. The Eastern Orthodox Church believes that Mary was the apostle to the apostles; therefore she was a well respected, highly important member of Jesus’ “entourage” and far from the repentant sinner of Protestant teachings. Gnostics have the most radical view of Mary from my egocentric position. The Gnostics believe that Mary was enlightened above the other apostles, and she was privy to many lessons and teachings from Jesus that no one else was permitted to know.

We will then reconvene into the large group and discuss which “version” of Mary is the most personal and relevant to us. I do not anticipate that there will be a consensus among the group for this question as it is rather personal. Some women might find comfort in Mary as a prostitute because it shows how we can be redeemed even if we are big sinners by society’s standards. Others might enjoy Mary as the apostle to the apostles because it gives them an example for how they can go out and teach God’s word as women of the church. Or, some might prefer Mary as enlightened because it makes them feel that they can have a special relationship with God and continue to strive to learn as much about their religion as possible.

At this point, I will show a power point presentation with paintings and images of Mary throughout history. As a group, we will examine each picture and try to determine which of Mary’s personas is dominant; however, there are elements of all three personas in each of the pictures, so there should be some interesting discussion as people find these different elements. For example, in the Eastern Orthodox icon, Mary has a red egg which is a symbol of knowledge (Gnostic view) and
an alabaster jar (Western/traditional view). This shows how Mary’s personas overlap and how her overall image contains elements from all three view points.

This point is a good time to transition into women’s role within the Church. In our church, women are not allowed to be elders, deacons, or pastors. The same is true within many other churches and denominations. Therefore, we will look at the following topics: ordination, men’s vs. women’s roles within the Church, and women as sexual beings. Why aren’t women allowed to be pastors and preach in the pulpit on Sundays? Why can’t women serve communion and be involved with the important decisions of the church? Why is it that a woman’s sexuality is viewed as being a negative and sinful thing when it can be beautiful when honored in the context of marriage? These are all very controversial topics, and I’m not sure how we will conclude on the topic. I imagine that there will be a fair deal of ranting and raving, but I don’t want the discussion to turn into a feminist riot. Ultimately, I hope that we can come away from the discussion feeling that we do have a special purpose within the Church that men could never possibly fulfill since they sometimes lack the emotional and sensitive capacities needed for our jobs.

Bringing it all home

Throughout the entire program, we have been working through the discernment process to help participants determine what they believe in the four areas we have been studying: truth, the person of Jesus, knowledge, and the role of women in the Church. I did not have this realization until one of my last meetings with Dr. Yanos when she brought it to my attention, and it absolutely astounded me. It was as if I was able to see the big picture for the first time, and putting the entire program in the context of the discernment process really pulled everything together and solidified my thesis. Now when people ask me what my thesis is about, I can tell them it’s about discerning the fact from fiction in Brown’s novel – hence the title of the program.
Since this was such an important realization to me, I want to make sure that program participants have it as well. So, I will list the steps of discernment on the board and allow them to see how we have worked through the process over the course of the series. The first step is studying the fact which means increasing knowledge, and we accomplish this the very first week as we discuss our church’s doctrine and examine Brown’s alleged “facts.” The second step in the discernment process is to consult a wise person or a spiritual director. While I am in no way claiming to be either of these, I am a non-biased mediator in this process. I will not tell the audience what to think or what they want to hear; instead, I will force them to look at all sides of the issues and allow them to come to their own conclusions. The next step is consulting God, and it should occur throughout the entire discernment process. This is why we open each week with prayer and a scripture reading and make sure to pray again before we leave. We really want God to bless our time and studies. The fourth step is to allow plenty of time for discernment to “sink in.” That is why the program takes place over four weeks and each week tends to get more in depth and involved with the material. Finally, individuals must affirm peace and love with their conclusions. Hopefully, this is what participants will leave with! They should be at peace with their conclusions, and they should feel closer to God and the Church as a result of it.

At this point, the formal portion of the discussion series is over, but I do want to leave participants with one important thought: although The Da Vinci Code challenges many of our basic and founding principles as Christians, it has definitely renewed interest in Christianity and the Bible, and we can thank Dan Brown for that. After all, I wouldn’t be creating this thesis project if it weren’t for the novel.

And that concludes my program! I might draft some sort of concluding survey to be administered once I left the room so that I can receive some feedback from the participants regarding the program, my “teaching” style, the information presented, and any other programs in
which they might like to participate in the future. This will help me assess the program’s effectiveness so that I can make changes accordingly for future presentations.

Following the rationale, you will find all of the materials, notes, handouts, and power points that I have created to supplement the program. The agendas for each week contain the order of events and my personal notes for the discussions. My personal notes are just that – personal notes, so they are designed to prompt me regarding certain points or illustrations that I want to make. They probably will not make sense unless I am there to explain.

All materials are in order as presented.


**Just the “Facts”**

**Week One Agenda**

**Objectives:** To establish meetings as a safe and open environment for discussion. To bring to light all of the issues that attendees have with Brown’s novel, *The Da Vinci Code*, and educate those who have not read the book. Also, provided interest is displayed, to discuss the differences between Catholicism and Protestantism and establish likes and dislikes of each accordingly.

**Prayer/Welcome**

**Read 1 Corinthians 1:20 – 31**

20Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. 22For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, 24but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

26For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 27But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, 29so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. 30He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption. 31Therefore, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

**Introduction to program**

Welcome everyone and introduce them to the program format. Make sure that they know that reading *The Da Vinci Code* is neither a prerequisite or requirement for attending the program, each week is a stand alone “unit” so if they must miss one week they will be encouraged to attend the next one, and finally, establish that this is a safe, scholarly atmosphere where everyone’s opinions and ideas are to be treated fairly and with respect.

**Discussion of plot (handout)**

- Ask for general questions/comments (don’t want to spend too much time here)
- Emphasize Brown’s assertion about Jesus
  - He was entirely human.
  - The Bible does not provide an accurate history of his life, and takes away from his humanness.
  - He was married to Mary Magdalene and conceived a child with her.

**View picture slide show**

- Notice Madonna of the Rocks hand positions
- Last Supper – notice the 'V's that symbolize womanhood
- Pyramids are good examples of the blade and chalice symbols of man and woman
Ehrman's "facts" (handout)

1.) This is an excellent point. At this time in history, very few people could write, so people depended upon oral story telling to pass down stories and traditions. Have you ever played the game “Telephone?” Isn’t it possible that the message got mixed up somewhere along the line?

2.) Historians have shown that the four Gospels that we know today (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) were already accepted as the main gospels before the Council of Nicea. It was a common understanding – not something ordained by Constantine.

3.) Based off your own experience or gut instinct and ignoring the Bible, have you experienced Jesus as divine or human? What is your reasoning?

4.) We will examine this topic more during Week Two.

5.) Do these little slip-ups (such as dates and “facts”) bother you yet? Don’t they take away from Brown’s credibility? As we will see in Week Three, the Gnostic gospels portray Jesus as being very divine.

6.) Why is marriage issue such an issue? Does it matter what the norm was at the time or what Jesus’ status was whether that is married or single?

7.) Once again, is Brown credible? Has he really done his research? Are we going to take him seriously?

8.) Why does her lineage matter?

9.) Let’s be honest, a pregnant woman would probably not be allowed to travel all over Israel and the Middle East to follow Jesus.

10.) Why do you think Brown takes all of these hypothetical documents, stories, and traditions and tries to make them real? Is it for the story or does he believe them?

View rest of slide show on Catholicism vs. Protestantism – have Catholic Catechism on hand, as well as notes regarding College Park doctrine. Discuss Catholic position as a large group, split into smaller groups to fill out the Protestant side, and then come together for large group discussion.

- Catholicism views both the Church & Scripture very important ways to know God; whereas, Protestants believe in scripture to know God
- Sufficient – tradition helps understand and guide reading to prevent mistakes
- Grace of God – gives us what we need to be able to do spiritual good in relationship to sin
- Justification is only received through the grace of God
- Predestination – not born again once – long process to be reborn and God is constantly calling his people to conversion.
- The seven Sacraments are: baptism, Eucharist, reconciliation, confirmation, marriage, holy orders, and anointing of the sick.

Ending discussion questions

- What do you believe are the key differences between Protestantism and Catholicism?
- Do these differences affect eternal salvation for one group or the other?
- How do you know that you are right?

For next time

- How do you know Jesus?

Ending Prayer and Dismissal
Plot Overview
In the Louvre, a monk of Opus Dei named Silas apprehends Jacques Saunière, the museum’s curator, and demands to know where the Holy Grail is. After Saunière tells him, Silas shoots him and leaves him to die. However, Saunière has lied to Silas about the Grail’s location. Realizing that he has only a few minutes to live and that he must pass on his important secret, Saunière paints a pentacle on his stomach with his own blood, draws a circle with his blood, and drags himself into the center of the circle, re-creating the position of Da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man. He also leaves a code, a line of numbers, and two lines of text on the ground in invisible ink.

A police detective, Jerome Collet, calls Robert Langdon, the story’s protagonist and a professor of symbology, and asks him to come to the Louvre to try to interpret the scene. Langdon does not yet realize that he himself is suspected of the murder.

After murdering Saunière, Silas calls the “Teacher” and tells him that, according to Saunière, the keystone is in the Church of Saint-Suplice in Paris. The Teacher sends Silas there. Silas follows Saunière’s clues to the keystone’s location and discovers that he has been tricked. In a fit of rage, he kills Sister Sandrine Bieil, the church’s keeper and a sentry for the Priory of Sion. At the Louvre, Langdon meets Jerome Collet and Bezu Fache, the police captain, and realizes that the two policemen suspect him of the murder.

Sophie Neveu, an agent of the department of cryptology and Saunière’s granddaughter, arrives at the crime scene and tells Langdon that he must call the embassy. When Langdon calls the number Sophie gave him, he reaches her answering service. The message warns Langdon that he is in danger and should meet Sophie in the bathroom at the Louvre.

In the bathroom, Sophie shows Langdon that Fache is noting his movements with a tracking device. She throws the device out the window onto a passing truck, tricking the police into thinking that Langdon has escaped from the Louvre.

Sophie also tells Langdon that the last line in the secret message, “P.S. Find Robert Langdon.” was her grandfather’s way of alerting her: P.S. are the initials of her grandfather’s nickname for her, Princesse Sophie. Langdon thinks that P.S. might stand for Priory of Sion, an ancient brotherhood devoted to the preservation of the pagan goddess worship tradition, and to the maintenance of the secret that Saunière died protecting.

Langdon decodes the second and third lines in Saunière’s message: “Leonardo Da Vinci! The Mona Lisa!” Sophie returns to the paintings to look for another clue. The police have returned to the Louvre as well, and they arrest Langdon. Sophie finds a key behind the Madonna of the Rocks. By using the painting as a hostage, she manages to disarm the police officer and get herself and Langdon out of the building.

As Sophie and Langdon drive toward the Swiss bank identified on the back of the key, Langdon explains the history of the Priory of Sion and their armed force, the Knights Templar. He reveals
that the Priory protects secret documents known as the *Sangreal*, or the Holy Grail. Langdon’s latest manuscript is about this very subject.

When Sophie and Langdon enter the bank, an unnamed security guard realizes that they are fugitives and calls the police, but André Vernet, the bank’s manager and a friend of Saunière’s, recognizes Sophie and helps her and Langdon escape. Sophie and Langdon figure out that the number left near Saunière’s body must be the account number that will open the vault. When they open the vault they find a cryptex, a message delivery device designed by Da Vinci and crafted by Saunière. The cryptex can only be opened with a password.

Vernet successfully smuggles Sophie and Langdon past Collet in the back of a locked armored car. Vernet turns on them, but they manage to get away with the cryptex, which Langdon realizes is actually the Priory keystone—that is, the key to all of the secrets the Priory holds about the location of the Holy Grail.

Langdon and Sophie go to the house of Sir Leigh Teabing, a historian, to ask for his help opening the box. Teabing tells them the legend of the Grail, starting with the historical evidence that the Bible didn’t come straight from God but was compiled by Emperor Constantine. He also cites evidence that Jesus’ divinity was decided by a vote at Nicaea, and that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene, who was of royal blood, and had children by her. Teabing shows them the hidden symbols in *The Last Supper* and the painted representation of the Magdalene. He tells them that the Holy Grail is actually Mary Magdalene’s body and the documents that prove Mary’s blood line is related to Jesus. He says he thinks Saunière and the others may have been killed because the Church suspected that the Priory was about to unveil this secret.

As Langdon is showing off the cryptex, Silas appears and hits him over the head. Silas holds Sophie and Teabing at gunpoint and demands the keystone, but Teabing attacks Silas, hitting him on the thigh where his punishment belt is located, and Sophie finishes him off by kicking him in the face. They tie Silas up.

Collet arrives at the castle, but Sophie, Langdon, the bound Silas, Teabing, and his servant, Rémy, escape and board Teabing’s private plane to England. Sophie realizes that the writing on the cryptex is decipherable if viewed in a mirror. They come to understand the poem, which refers to “a headstone praised by Templars” and the “Atbash cipher,” which will help them arrive at the password. Langdon remembers that the Knights Templar supposedly worshipped the god Baphomet, who is sometimes represented by a large stone head. The word, unscrambled by the Atbash Cipher, is *Sofia*. When they open the cryptex, however, they find only another cryptex, this one with a clue about a tomb where a knight was buried by a pope. They must find the orb that should have been on the knight’s tomb.
The Vitruvian Man

Madonna of the Rocks

Mona Lisa

The Last Supper

The Rose Line

The Pyramids
Roslin Church - Scotland

The Catholic Position
According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church

Scripture

- Sufficient
  - All Sacred Scripture is but one book, and that one book is Christ, because all divine Scripture speaks of Christ, and all divine Scripture is fulfilled in Christ (108).

- Apocrypha
  - The Church accepts and venerates as inspired the 46 books of the Old Testament and the 27 books of the New (137).

Anthropology

- Original Sin
  - Only the light of divine Revelation clarifies the reality of sin and particularly of the sin committed at mankind’s origins. Without the knowledge Revelation gives of God we cannot recognize sin clearly and are tempted to explain it as merely a developmental flaw, a psychological weakness, a mistake, or the necessary consequence of an inadequate social structure, etc. Only in the knowledge of God’s plan for man can we grasp that sin is an abuse of the freedom that God gives to created persons so that they are capable of loving him and loving one another (387).

Anthropology

- Human Will
  - By faith, man completely submits his intellect and his will to God. With his whole being man gives his assent to God the revealer. Sacred Scripture calls this human response to God, the author of revelation, “the obedience of faith” (143).

Soteriology

- Predestination
  - God predestines no one to go to hell; for this, a willful turning away from God (a mortal sin) is necessary, and persistence in it until the end. In the Eucharistic liturgy and in the daily prayers of her faithful, the Church implores the mercy of God who does not want “any to perish, but all to come to repentance” (1037).
  - God “desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth”: that is, of Christ Jesus. Christ must be proclaimed to all nations and individuals, so that this revelation may reach to the ends of the earth (74).
Soteriology (Salvation)

- **Atonement**
  - By his Passion, Christ delivered us from Satan and from sin. He merited for us the new life in the Holy Spirit. His grace restores what sin had damaged in us (1708).

- **Grace of God**
  - Since the initiative belongs to God in the order of grace, no one can merit the initial grace of forgiveness and justification, at the beginning of conversion. Moved by the Holy Spirit and by charity, we can then merit for ourselves and for others the graces needed for our sanctification, for the increase of grace and charity, and for the attainment of eternal life. Even temporal goods like health and friendship can be merited in accordance with God's wisdom. These graces and goods are the object of Christian prayer. Prayer attends to the grace we need for meritorious actions (2010).

- **Justification**
  - Justification has been merited for us by the Passion of Christ who offered himself on the cross as a living victim, holy and pleasing to God, whose blood has become the instrument of atonement for the sins of all men. Justification is conferred in Baptism, the sacrament of faith. It conforms us to the righteousness of God, who makes us inwardly just by the power of his mercy. Its purpose is the glory of God and of Christ, and the gift of eternal life (1992).

- **Regeneration**
  - Since it belongs to the supernatural order, grace escapes our experience and cannot be known except by faith. We cannot therefore, rely on our feelings or our works to conclude that we are justified and saved ... (2005).
  - The grace of the Holy Spirit confers upon us the righteousness of God. Uniting us by faith and Baptism to the passion and Resurrection of Christ, the Spirit makes us sharers in his life (2017).

- **Good works**
  - The merit of man before God in the Christian life arises from the fact that God has freely chosen to associate man with the work of his grace. The fatherly action of God is first on his own initiative, and then follows man's free acting through his collaboration, so that the merit of good works is to be attributed in the first place to the grace of God, then to the faithful. Man's merit, moreover, itself is due to God, for his good actions proceed in Christ, from the predispositions and assistance given by the Holy Spirit (2008).

- **Salvation**
  - As sacrament, the Church is Christ's instrument. "She is taken up by him also as the instrument for the salvation of all," "the universal sacrament of salvation," by which Christ is "at once manifesting and actualizing the mystery of God's love for men." The Church "is the visible plan of God's love for humanity," because God desires "that the whole human race may become one People of God, form one Body of Christ, and be built up into one temple of the Holy Spirit."
Sacraments
This is the meaning of the Church's affirmation that the sacraments act *ex opere operato* (literally: "by the very fact of the action's being performed"), i.e., by virtue of the saving work of Christ, accomplished once for all. It follows that "the sacrament is not wrought by the righteousness of either the celebrant or the recipient, but by the power of God." From the moment that a sacrament is celebrated in accordance with the intention of the Church, the power of Christ and his Spirit acts in and through it, independently of the personal holiness of the minister. Nevertheless, the fruits of the sacraments also depend on the disposition of the one who receives them.

Priesthood
The ministerial priesthood has the task not only of representing Christ – Head of the Church – before the assembly of the faithful, but also of acting in the name of the whole Church when presenting to God the prayer of the Church, and above all when offering the Eucharistic sacrifice (1552).

Transubstantiation
It is by the conversion of the bread and wine into Christ's body and blood that Christ becomes present in transubstantiation. The Church Fathers strongly affirmed the faith of the Church in the efficacy of the Word of Christ and of the action of the Holy Spirit to bring about this conversion. Thus St. John Chrysostom declares:

... it is not man that causes the things offered to become the Body and Blood of Christ, but he who was crucified for us, Christ himself. The priest, in the role of Christ, pronounces these words, but their power and grace are God's. This is my body, he says. This word transforms the things offered (1375).
Purgatory

The church gives the name *Purgatory* to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned... (1031).

This teaching is also based on the practice of prayer for the dead, already mentioned in Sacred Scripture: "Therefore [Judas Maccabeus] made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin." From the beginning the Church has honored the memory of the dead and offered prayers in suffrage for them, above all the Eucharistic sacrifice, so that, thus purified, they may attain the beatific vision of God (1032).
Some “Factual” Errors in *The Da Vinci Code*

Taken from the book

*Truth and Fiction in The Da Vinci Code*

by Bart Ehrman

p. xiv-xv

(Page numbers below represent pages in Dan Brown’s novel, *The Da Vinci Code*)

1. Jesus' life was decidedly not "recorded by thousands of followers across the land." He didn't even have thousands of followers, let alone literate ones (p. 231).

2. It's not true that eighty Gospels "were considered for the New Testament" (p. 231). This makes it sound like there was a contest, entered by mail. . . .

3. It's absolutely not true that Jesus was not considered divine until the Council of Nicea, that before that he was considered merely as "a mortal prophet" (p. 233). The vast majority of Christians by the early fourth century acknowledged him as divine. (Some thought he was so divine he wasn't even human!)

4. Constantine did not commission a "new Bible" that omitted references to Jesus' human traits (p. 234). For one thing, he didn't commission a new Bible at all. For another thing, the books that did get included are chock-full of references to his human traits (he gets hungry, tired, angry; he gets upset; he bleeds, he dies . . . ).

5. The Dead Sea Scrolls were not "found in the 1950s" (p. 234). It was 1948. And the Nag Hammadi documents do not tell the Grail story at all, nor do they emphasize Jesus' human traits. Quite the contrary.

6. "Jewish decorum" in no way forbade "a Jewish man to be unmarried" (p. 245). In fact, most of the community behind the Dead Sea Scrolls were male unmarried celibates.

7. The Dead Sea Scrolls were not among "the earliest Christian records" (p. 245). They are Jewish, with nothing Christian in them.

8. We have no idea about the lineage of Mary Magdalene; nothing connects her with the "house of Benjamin." And even if she were, this wouldn't make her a descendent of David (p. 248).

9. Mary Magdalene was pregnant at the crucifixion? That's a good one (p. 255).

10. The Q document is not a surviving source being hid by the Vatican, nor is it a book allegedly written by Jesus himself. It's a hypothetical document that scholars have posited as having been available to Matthew and Luke, principally a collection of the sayings of Jesus. Roman Catholic scholars think the same of it as non-Catholics: there's nothing secretive about it (p. 256).
Jesus: Who do you say he is?

Week Two Agenda

Objectives: To have participants realize that they know and experience Jesus through means other than the Bible and what others (parents/friends/clergy) have told them. To really see Jesus as being human through the book of Mark and determine our emotions at viewing him as human as well as divine.

Prayer/Welcome

Read Philippians 5:1-11

1 So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, 2 complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. 3 Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. 5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. 9 Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Discussion questions

- How do you know Jesus?
  - Have attendees pull from personal experiences other than the Bible or parents. Recall when the have felt Jesus.
- Who do you think Jesus is?
  - Inspirational speaker? Prophet? Man? Savior?

PowerPoint on the book of Mark

Have attendees break into small groups to look up the verses, then return to large group for power point discussion.

Context for the verses

- 1:13 & 14 – After Jesus' baptism when the Holy Spirit put him in the wilderness for 40 days to be tempted.
- 2:25 – Jesus was responding to the Pharisees who were criticizing him and his disciples for eating on the Sabbath.
- 3:21 & 31 – Jesus had just selected his twelve apostles, and his family thought he was crazy for all of his preaching and teaching.
- 4:38 – Jesus and the disciples were crossing water when a huge storm came up and was filling their boat.
- 5:30 – Jesus was walking through a crowd and the woman who had been hemorrhaging for 12 years reached out to touch his robe and be healed. (Contrast w/ the very public proclamation of the woman in Luke 8:42)
3:12 & 5:43 – Jesus had been performing miracles and driving out demons in Tyre and Sidon.

6:3 – Jesus returned to Nazareth and was preaching on the Sabbath when people began to ask who he was.

6:5 – Once again, Jesus was in Nazareth and he was unable to perform miracles except putting his hands on a few sick people to heal them. However, it’s interesting because in Matthew the verbiage is “Jesus did not.”

6:31 – Just before Jesus fed the 5000.

8:12 & 9:19 – Jesus had just fed the 4000 bread and was being bothered by the Pharisees. Then, he had been with Peter, James, & John, and had to bring a demon out of a little boy that the other disciples had been unable to remove.

8:23 – 25 – Jesus heals the blind man at Bethsaida. Showing the continued growth and strength of Jesus throughout the book. Also, the 2 parts of discipleship: following Jesus in his grace and glory and following him to the crucifixion.

10:18 – Jesus was talking to the young rich man, who asked how to get into heaven.

11:14 – After Palm Sunday, Jesus was hungry, and walking with the disciples, but the fig tree he saw had no fruit because it wasn't in season. Also a symbol for Israel’s lack of faith. He’s cursing Israel too.

11:29 & 33 – Jesus’ authority was challenged by the priests/elders/scribes, so he put a question before them in an almost dare, knowing that they would chicken out.

13:34 – 36 – Jesus was in Gethsemane praying that God would take away his burdens.

15:34 – Jesus is on the cross, and he doesn’t understand why everything is happening to him – why he has to be the chosen Son of God. But if he knows he’s divine, then why does he think God has abandoned him?

Follow up questions

What does seeing Jesus portrayed in such a human light do for you? How is the incarnation such a beautiful mystery?

- Comforting/attainable
- Emotions and how to deal with them (not sinful to be mad/sarcastic/witty)
- We become Christ – being godly, seeing Christ in others

Is it possible that Jesus was just a great leader and 100% human (we will discuss his supposed marriage and children during Week Four)?

How do you know that Jesus is the Son of God?

For next time

Reflect on the reason why Jesus chose to teach using parables. What is the role of knowledge in faith? Is it intended only for the “privileged?”

Ending prayer and dismissal
Jesus as a Human

According to the gospel of Mark
Alienes from English Standard Version (ESV) of the Holy Bible

Mark 1:13
- And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him.
  - Jesus was tempted just like we are; he could have said, “yes,” and given in to temptation.
  - The angels ministered to him because he needed it just as much as we do.

Mark 2:25
- And he said to them, “Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him:”
  - Jesus read the Old Testament. He didn’t have it infused in his head; he had to do it the hard way!
  - He looked to scripture to draw strength and comfort in his times of need.

Mark 3:21 & 3:31
- And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, “He is out of his mind.”
  - Even his family doubted his character and his abilities.
- And his mother and his brothers came, and standing outside they sent to him and called him.
  - Jesus had blood family members. He didn’t magically appear out of heaven with no human origin. Chances are, his family probably annoyed him at times—just like our own families.

Mark 4:38
- But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”
  - Jesus slept! He was sleeping so hard that he didn’t even notice the storm that he and his disciples had drifted into.

Mark 5:30
- And Jesus, perceiving in himself that power had gone out from him, immediately turned about in the crowd and said, “Who touched my garments?”
  - He honestly didn’t know! He wasn’t psychic. He had no idea who had touched him in such a large crowd of people.
And he strictly ordered them not to make him known. And he strictly charged them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

Is it possible that Jesus was trying to travel incognito? That he just wanted to be "normal" whenever possible?

And he could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them.

- What if we changed the verb to "did no might work"...
- Jesus had limitations! He could do NO WORK. He physically couldn't perform any major miracles – just a few smaller ones.

And he sighed deeply in his spirit and said, "Why does this generation seek a sign? Truly, I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation."

- He gets frustrated! Jesus sighs because he is frustrated with the Pharisees, and it almost seems that he withholds information just to bother them.

And he answered them, "O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me."

- He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village, and when he had spit on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, "Do you see anything?" And he looked up and said, "I see men, but they look like trees, walking." Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he opened his eyes, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.

- Is it possible that Jesus made a mistake the first time and had to try it again?
• And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone."
  - Jesus did not view himself as being "good." He viewed himself as just another human being with God being the only good thing in the world.

*Mark 11:14

• And he said to [a fig tree], "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard it.
  - He got mad at inanimate objects!
  - What about the fig tree as a symbol for Israel?

Mark 11:29 & 33

• Jesus said to [the priests/scribes/elders], "I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man? Answer me." . . . So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And Jesus said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."
  - Jesus was saucy! He had some attitude and a quick wit about him.

Mark 14:34-36

• And he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death. Remain here and watch." And going a little farther, he fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. And he said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."
  - Jesus was scared and prayed for his situation and circumstance to be different than what it was.

Mark 15:34

• And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"
  - Note Psalm 22:1, sense of despair that Jesus uses.
Knowledge: It's what’s for... salvation?

Week Three Agenda

Objectives: To have attendees be able to find discrepancies within Gnostic and Christian teachings and further confirm how they receive Christ's teachings and how they know that his teachings are true.

Prayer/WELCOME

Read 1 Timothy 1:3-11

3As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, 4nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith. 5The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. 6Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, 7desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions.

8Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully, 9understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, 10the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, 11in accordance with the glorious gospel of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted.

Discussion Question

• What is the role of knowledge in faith? Is it secret?

Split into small groups for discussion questions and review of Gnostic handout – have a copy of the Gnostic gospels on hand.

According to Pagels there are three major theological areas that differ between Christians and Gnostics:

• Separation between God and humanity – Christians believe that there is a divide between humanity and its creator whereas Gnostics believe that once you receive “gnosis” (special knowledge) that your knowledge is one with God so the “self” and the “divine” become identical

• The "theme" of Jesus' teachings – the Christian Jesus teaches about forgiveness and repentance of sins, and he came to serve as the ultimate sacrifice so that sins could be forgiven. The Gnostic Jesus teaches about enlightenment and illusion, and he came to earth as more of a guide to help achieve the enlightenment.

• The status of Jesus in relation to humanity – Christians believe that Jesus is divine and he will forever stand out from humanity no matter how close one, personally, becomes to God. Gnostics believe that once someone achieves enlightenment, that Jesus is then no longer his/her superior, but instead, his/her equal.
Reconvene to large group and share small group discussions/conclusions
Through our discussion, we want to show how Brown has misrepresented Gnosticism and how Christianity has more truth than Gnosticism.

1.) **Mark 4:11-12** (Just before is the parable of the sower Mark 4) "...To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, so that 'they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.' " Testing his listeners to see how open they are and if they are ready to receive teaching. If they ponder, and are open, then they will receive the knowledge (crawl before you walk).

2.) **The Apocalypse of Peter** was written almost as a rebuttal to Christians who were attacking Gnosticism. It counteracts Brown’s point that gospels displaying Jesus’ humanity were left out (thus hinting that all those showing his divinity were left in) because this one shows him as being human and divine.

3.) **Heracleon** is talking about the gnosis here; however, isn't that how Christians come to know God? They hear stories, read the Bible, etc. and then one day, the Holy Spirit comes to them and they are saved.

4.) **Christians do not have to go through any sort of special initiation** or ceremony or pass a test to accept the Holy Spirit. They just have to believe in Jesus, his death and resurrection, and the Holy Spirit will come into them. Continue with the openness theme of opening yourself to receive the Holy Spirit (i.e. baptism & its meaning).

5.) **Reflects in the role of Jesus compared to others.** He needs to be higher than everyone else – he is NOT our equal. Therefore, shouldn't the same translate into our church hierarchies?

6.) **Irenaeus** is teaching that it is crucial to have a hierarchy in order to share knowledge with Christians. He has said several times that Christians must be united in a catholic (universal) church, and the Church plays a key role in helping them attain the necessary knowledge to be saved.

7.) **I want them to be able to recognize the misrepresentations in Gnosticism** in that it is a very subjective point of view, and that there can be no distinct laws or traditions or completely accepted scripture because all of the "clergy," "teachers," and "students" have different experiences and revelations when they become enlightened. Therefore, it is a different experience for every individual. Why are Gnostics so elitist as to think that they have this knowledge and we (the masses) don’t? Why don’t they share it? How do they know that they are right? Which brings us back to the DaVinci Code and parallels the Holy Grail. The war between the gods led to a dualistic view of creation (the creator god vs. the transcendent god). How does this play into environmental issues? If the earth is bad, should we even care?

**For next time**
How do you think the Gnostics would portray women in the church?

**Ending prayer and dismissal**
Gnosticism and the Gnostic Gospels

The Greek word "gnosis" is translated as knowledge. Therefore, Gnostics believe that "to know oneself, at the deepest level, is simultaneously to know God; this is the secret of gnosis" (Pagels xix). The Gnostics also believed that the Christian God is merely the creator (or demiurge) and there exist higher gods above Him. However, he is very jealous, and tells humanity that he is the only God.

According to Pagels there are three major theological areas that differ between Christians and Gnostics:

- Separation between God and humanity
- The "theme" of the Jesus' teachings
- The role of Jesus in relation to others

1.) Look up Mark 4:11-12. Why is Jesus withholding the meanings of his parables from the masses? Is he trying to impart "gnosis" (the secret knowledge) to the disciples?

2.) The crucifixion according to the Apocalypse of Peter 81.4-24, reads:

   ..I saw him apparently being seized by them. And I said, "What am I seeing, O Lord? Is it really you whom they take? And are you holding on to me? And are they hammering the feet and hands of another? Who is this one above the cross, who is glad and laughing?" The Savior said to me, "He whom you saw being glad and laughing above the cross is the Living Jesus. But he into whose hands and feet they are driving the nails is his fleshly part, which is the substitute. They put to shame that which remained in his likeness. And look at him, and [look at] me!"

What do you believe the Gnostics are trying to say about this view of Jesus?

3.) According to Heracleon, a Gnostic teacher in 160 AD, "at first, people believe because of the testimony of others. But, then they come to believe from the truth itself." Isn't this process similar to how people become Christians?

4.) Pagels writes "...every initiate [person freed from the demiurge's power] was assumed to have received, through the initiation ritual, the charismatic gift of direct inspiration through the Holy Spirit" (Pagels 41). How does this differ from Christians' perspective on the role of the Holy Spirit?

5.) The ancient orthodox writer Tertullian believes that there are certain distinctions that need to occur within the church: women & men, clergy & lay people, newer Christians & older believers, etc. Gnostics, on the other hand, believed that positions and rankings should change in order to prevent jealousy and encourage participation and camaraderie among its members. Are distinctions, structure, and set up important to a church?
6.) **One argument against gnosticism** put forth by the teacher Irenaeus says that "True gnosis is that which consists in the doctrine of the apostles, and the ancient constitution [systema] of the church throughout the whole world, and the character of the body of Christ according to the successions of bishops, by which they have handed down that which exists everywhere" (Pagels 105). What is he saying? Does this seem more likely and workable than the Gnostic method?

7.) **What are some of the flaws that you see with Gnostic teachings?**

For next week: Start thinking of everything you have been taught/heard/known about Mary Magdalene.
Mary, Mary quite contrary
Week Four Agenda

Objectives: To explore Mary Magdalene's role in scripture and expand away from the role of prostitute to see her other facets. Also, to examine the origins of the Mary/Jesus marriage claim. After deciding our individual opinions of Mary, we will transition to discussing the role of women within the church today.

Prayer/Welcome

Read John 20:11 -18

20:11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stopped to look into the tomb. 12And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. 13They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." 14Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." 16Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). 17Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" 18Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord" – and that he had said these things to her.

Questions

- Is this how you view Mary?
  - Discuss how Mary came to be viewed as a prostitute (multiple Mary’s in Luke).
- What does this passage show you about the relationship between Mary and Jesus?
- Brown presents us with the idea that Mary and Jesus might have been married. Where could this idea have possibly come from?
- The question we must now ask is: Does it matter if Mary and Jesus were husband and wife, and Mary gave birth to Jesus’ child and bloodline?
- We must define Mary for ourselves.

Activity

The group will break into smaller groups to discuss the various views of Mary: Protestant – prostitute, Eastern Orthodox – apostle to the apostles, Gnostic – enlightened. I will distribute a handout with the Gnostic writings of Mary so they can read the account firsthand. After discussing these perspectives, we will reconvene into the large group to share our findings.

Questions

- Which view of Mary Magdalene speaks the most powerfully to you? Why?
- Show power point with images of Mary’s “personas”
  - Have group describe how they can see multiple elements of Mary’s personas in the pictures
    - Examine facial expressions and emotive qualities
  - Ask them why/how there can be so many different views of Mary
• Time period and events in history
• Portray women as sinners (control women)

• How does (or doesn’t) Mary’s example serve as an example for women in the church, today?
  o Ordination
  o Men’s vs. Women’s roles
  o Sexual beings
    (Keep a running list of participants’ ideas on the blackboard and try to do some mapping to find themes/repeating elements in their examples.)

• There is just so much more to her person than being a prostitute!

Discernment Process
• Study the facts
  o Increase knowledge and view facts from all sides of the issue.
• Consult a wise person/spiritual director
  o Have an unbiased mediator to ensure that decisions are made without influence by outside sources and that you are choosing what you want to believe -- not what you are “supposed” to believe.
• Consult God
  o Pray! Ask him what he wants you to believe.
• Allow time to pass
  o Don’t rush the decision or try to digest it all at one. It takes time.
• Affirm peace and love
  o In your mind. Otherwise you are not truly happy with the conclusions, and the discernment process was ineffective.

Ending thoughts
• Although Brown has severely offended many Christians and religious organizations, should we perhaps thank him for providing a sense of renewal in relation to scripture and Bible studies? He has given us a reason to investigate the other side of Jesus as well as a regeneration of interest in God’s word. God can use anything to spread his message; therefore, why can’t He use The Da Vinci Code to bring glory back to Him in some ways?
Mary according to the Gnostic Gospels

The Gnostics view Mary as enlightened and having received special information and teachings from Jesus to which the other disciples were not privy. The following are some analysis and excerpts from the The Gospel of Mary as found in the book *The Complete Gospels* by Robert J. Miller.

Miller’s comments on Mary:

- Mary Magdalene gives one example of the leadership roles of women in early Christianity, roles that came to be increasingly challenged.
- At the Savior’s departure, Mary takes over his role. She comforts the distressed disciples, turns their hearts toward thoughts about the Savior’s words, and gives them special teaching that will allow them to overcome the sin of the world.

Excerpts from The Gospel of Mary:

- 6:1Peter said to Mary, “Sister, we know that the Savior loved you more than any other woman. Tell us the words of the Savior that you know, but which we haven’t heard.”
  3Mary responded, “I will report to you as much as I remember that you don’t know.”
- 7:3[Jesus] said to [Mary], ‘Congratulations to you for not wavering at seeing me. For where the mind is, there is the treasure.’
- 10:7Levi said to Peter, ‘Peter, you have a constant inclination to anger and you are always ready to give way to it. And even now you are doing exactly that by questioning the woman as if you’re her adversary. If the Savior considered her to be worthy, who are you to disregard her? For he knew her completely [and] loved her devotedly.

Mary according to the Eastern Orthodox Church

The Eastern Orthodox Church embraces Mary as the Apostle to the Apostles. Look at the story below to see her influence among the Church.

**Mary Magdalene Meets Tiberius**

A “legend” taught by the Eastern Orthodox Church for over 1500 years. (Taken from the web site [www.northernway.org/school/omni/gallery.html](http://www.northernway.org/school/omni/gallery.html))

According to the ancient tradition of the East, Mary Magdalene was a wealthy woman from whom Christ expelled seven "demons." During the three years of Jesus' ministry she helped support him and his other disciples with her money. When almost everyone else fled, she stayed with him at the cross. On Easter morning she was the first to bear witness to his resurrection. She is called "Equal to the Apostles." The Eastern tradition tells us that after the Ascension she journeyed to Rome where she was admitted to the court of Tiberius Caesar because of her high social standing. After describing how poorly Pilate had administered justice at Jesus' trial, she told Caesar that Jesus had risen from the dead. To help explain his resurrection she picked up an egg from the dinner table. Caesar responded that a human being could no more rise from the dead than the egg in her hand turn red. The egg turned red immediately, which is why red eggs have been exchanged at Easter for centuries in the Byzantine East.

Mary traveled the Mediterranean preaching the resurrection. Like Peter and Paul, she died a martyr and she bears witness to the important role women once held in the Church.

Mary according to Western/traditional views:
Protestants view Mary as the penitent prostitute. She is in the Bible as an example of Jesus' ability to forgive sins and an example of how we are to turn our lives around and live for Jesus once forgiven.

- What have you been taught through church/Sunday school/sermons about Mary? What would you say is the Protestant, “consensus” view of Mary?

**Pulling it all together**
- What similarities do you see among these differing “views” or “emphases” on Mary’s persona?
  - Hint: An egg is a symbol of knowledge.
- Which view speaks most powerfully to you as an individual?
- Which view speaks most powerfully to you as a woman of the Church?
Mary, Mary Quite Contrary

What do you notice about the following paintings' representations of Mary? Notice facial expressions, colors, other objects in the paintings, etc.

- The Appearance of Christ to Mary Magdalene by Alexander Ivanov, 1839
- Eastern Orthodox icon
- The Penance of Mary Magdalene, 1597
- Saint Mary Magdalene by Carlo Dolci, 1597
- Mary Magdalen by Bernardino Luni, 1525
Sources for Images

- [http://www.oceannu.com/magdalene/Mary_Magdalen_by_Luini.htm](http://www.oceannu.com/magdalene/Mary_Magdalen_by_Luini.htm)
- [www.artchive.com/...el_greco_magdalene.jpg.html](http://www.artchive.com/...el_greco_magdalene.jpg.html)
Sources


Appendix A

College Park Doctrine - interview with Joe Bartemus

- Protestant Evangelical from a Baptist background
- Differences in Salvation:
  - Protestants - faith alone
  - Catholics – salvation as cooperative works between God and man
- Evangelical – proclaim gospel (Angel)
  - "Good message/news"
  - Have faith that we want to spread

- Scripture is authoritative and from God
  - No errors
  - Foundation point of C.P. doctrine

- God is triune
  - comes from scripture
  - use nature to inform/support the revelation of God

- Doctrine of man
  - Humanity is sinful and needs salvation
  - brought by God

- Doctrine of salvation
  - grace through faith
  - not of works

- Doctrine of the church
  - Church is "children of God"
  - expands around the world
  - only way to God is through Christ

- Doctrine of "last things"
  - God will return
  - He will Judge humanity
  - Eternal heaven/hell
  - future resurrection by God for his people
- Only source of knowing Christ is through scripture
  - Catholics place more emphasis on tradition & hierarchy
    - Purgatory – Apocrypha
    - Mary
    - Sacraments – puts in position to merit grace and move closer to God

- CP Ordinance
  - Communion
  - Baptism
  - Recognition of what God has done – earn no merit
  - Some denominations consider foot washing

- Council of Nicea
  - Jesus is the son of God
  - Further conferences included the Holy Spirit

- Teach
- Worship
- Fellowship
- Compassion
- Evangelism

- You can form your own ideas/beliefs for yourself (priesthood of all believers) ability to question leaders