

CHRISTIANITY AND THE DA VINCI CODE
Teaching #4
WHO IS JESUS?

(Taken directly from the Alpha Course)

In The Da Vinci Code

Mr. Brown makes statements about Christianity
which I have challenged on many fronts
during this series.

We began by challenging an assumption that I wish *were* accurate: that
“the vast majority of Christians *know* the history of their faith”

and then, toward that goal of knowing our history
we examined the

Birth of Christianity and the Formation of the Bible
followed by a look at the challenges to early Christianity
in the form of Gnosticism
and the Role of Women in Christianity

In each session, we concluded by revisiting various claims
made by Mr. Brown’s characters,
and determining, in light of new information,
whether they were True or False.

Of all the claims,

the one that I want to challenge the most ardently is the following:

“Until (Constantine’s Council of Nicea in the 4th C.), Jesus was viewed by His
followers as a mortal prophet....*a great and powerful man, but a man nonetheless.*”
p. 233

As in so many other instances, Mr. Brown, I believe,
is voicing, through his novel, the ideas that permeate our culture
as there is much misinformation afloat about Jesus
about who Jesus said He was and
who early believers thought He was.

So it seems appropriate to end this series by asking WHO IS JESUS?

and to answer this question we will turn to the **Alpha Course**
and to Nicky Gumbel’s well thought-out presentation,
“Who Is Jesus?”

(If you have never taken the Alpha Course –
it is an 11 week course on the basic beliefs of Christianity,
offered in almost every denomination in America and around the world.

and I *highly* recommend it to all of you !)

“Who Is Jesus” is the foundational teaching of Alpha
since the identity of Jesus is foundational to Christianity !.

Let’s begin – and get a taste of the Alpha Course as we end *this* course...

I. Did Jesus Exist?

Apparently there is a Russian dictionary that describes Jesus as a “mythical figure who never existed”

I’m not sure even the Russian dictionaries say that any more
and I don’t think any serious historian
nor the most serious skeptic
could maintain that position today

because there is a great deal of evidence for Jesus’ existence,
both within the Bible, as one might expect,
and even outside the Bible

A. Let’s first consider the evidence outside the New Testament

For instance: Roman historians

Tacitus (directly)

Suetonius (indirectly)

both write about Jesus

In addition, the Jewish Historian Josephus (born 37 AD)
describes Jesus and His followers :

Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful works – a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles. He was [the] Christ; and when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at first did not forsake him for he appeared to them alive again the third day, as the divine prophets had foretold these and then thousand other wonderful things concerning him; and the tribe of Christians so named after him are not extinct at this day.

(Antiquities, XVIII, 63 f.)

Even if, as some suggest, the text has been corrupted,
the evidence of Josephus confirms, at the very least,
the historical existence of Jesus.

B. Furthermore, of course, **the evidence in the New Testament** is very strong

Some people say

NT written a long time ago

so how can it be trusted as accurate?

Answer = the science known as “Textual Criticism”

(mentioned in Teaching #2)

which measures the reliability of an ancient text in 2 ways:

1. How many years elapsed between the original writing of the piece and the earliest existing copy
2. How many copies of the earliest existing copies there are.

As chart from Week #2 shows,

no ancient manuscripts can match the Bible
in terms of “Textual Criticism”,

yet no classical scholar doubts the authenticity of such works as
Caesar's Gallic Wars,
Livy's Roman History,
etc.

As F.J.A. Hoyt (one of the most respected textual critics)
has written:
"In the variety and fullness of the evidence on which
it rests, the text of the New Testament stands absolutely
and unapproachably alone among ancient prose writings"
(The New Testament in the Original Greek, Vol. 1, p. 561)

Another leading scholar, Sir Frederick Kenyon,
summarized it this way:

The interval, then, between the dates of original composition and the earliest extant evidence becomes so small as to be in fact negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed. Both the *authenticity* and the general *integrity* of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established.
(The Bible and Archaeology: Harper & Row, 1940)

So there is ample evidence
both inside and outside the NT
that *Jesus did exist*

II. But that is probably much less questioned than "WHO IS JESUS, REALLY?"

In an interview on television with Martin Scorsese
(producer of the film *The Last Temptation of Christ*)
said that he made the film in order to show that
Jesus was a real **human being** !

Although there was considerable disagreement about this issue
in the Early Church (1st-4th Century Gnosticism)
as we discussed in Teaching #2

I think very few people today doubt that Jesus was fully human

He had a human body which got tired (John 4:6)
got hungry (Matthew 4:2)

He had human emotions: He got angry (Mark 11:15-17)
got sad (John 11:35)
loved (Mark 10:21)
cried (John 11:35, Luke 19:41)

He had human experiences: He was tempted (Mk 1:13)
learned (Luke 2:52)
worked (Mark 6:3)
obeyed His parents (Lk 2:51)

Real issues is
whether Jesus was MORE THAN A MAN ?!

Some would say; “Yes, of course! He was an extraordinary man !”.

The comedian Billy Connolly
spoke for many when he said
“I can’t believe in Christianity, but I think
Jesus was a *wonderful* man”.

One of my dearest friends defends Jesus all the time
as “the world’s greatest moral teacher”

But Christianity claims that Jesus was MUCH more
than even a GREAT man
that He was, and is, both
the unique Son of God
and God the Son, God incarnate as Son

and Christianity further claims that there is a
great deal of **evidence** to support
this contention

II. What Jesus said about Himself

Some people say “Jesus never even *claimed* to be God!”

Indeed, it is true that Jesus did not go around saying “I am God!”

Yet, when look at all he taught and claimed,
little doubt that Jesus was conscious of being a man
whose identity was God !
Consider what Jesus said about Himself

A. One of the fascinating things about Jesus was that
His teachings were *centered on Himself*.
not in the sense that He was “self-centered / selfish”
but rather “personal / incarnational”

That is, to all the human needs He said
“I am” the answer

Not, like the prophets, “I know” the answer
but “I am” the answer

Leading psychologists of the 20th C
have all recognized a human hunger:
Freud said: “ People are hungry for love.”
Jung said, “People are hungry for security”
Adler said “People are hungry for significance”

Jesus said “**I am** the bread of Life. Whoever comes to me
will never be hungry” (John 6:35)

Many people are walking in darkness,
depression, disillusionment, despair
looking for direction

Jesus said, “**I am** the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of the world.” (John 8:12)

John Newton, Author of Amazing Grace
wrote “I once was lost, but now am found,
was blind but now I see.

Many are fearful of death.

Often when I ask a seriously ill person what they think about death, they reply: “I don’t know what to think, so I never think about it”.

One woman answered, “I think it’s a big black hole”

Jesus said “**I am** the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die”. (John 11:25-26)

Many are burdened by worries, anxieties, fears and guilt

Jesus said, “Come to me, all you are weary and burdened, and **I** will give you rest”. (Mt 11:28)

Many are looking desperately for something or someone to trust.

Buddha said: I die searching for Truth.

Jesus said: **I am** the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Furthermore, Jesus said that

to receive Him was to receive God (Mt 10:40)

to welcome Him was to welcome God (Mk 9:37)

and even to see Him was to see God (John 14:9)

There’s a story of a young child drawing a picture. When her mother asked her what she was drawing, the child said “God”. The mother replied “Don’t be silly. No one knows what God looks like”. The child replied, “Well, they will as soon as I finish this picture.”

Summary: Jesus said, in effect:

“If you want to know what God looks like, look at me.”

B. Indirect claims

In addition to centering His teachings on His person,

Jesus said a number of things which,

(although *not direct* claims to be God)

show that He regarded Himself a being

in the same position as God

1. Jesus’ claim to **forgive sins** was an astonishing claim!

When friends lowered a paralytic through a roof to get him to Jesus, He said to the paralytic,

“My son, your sins are forgiven”. Now some of the scribes were sitting there, thinking to themselves, “Why does this man speak like that” It is blasphemy !! Who can forgive

sins but God alone?" (Mark 2:5)

Listen to what C.S. Lewis wrote about this claim
in his Mere Christianity:

One part of the claim tends to slip past us unnoticed because we have heard it so often that we no longer see what it amounts to. I mean the claim to forgive sins: any sins. Now unless the speaker is God, this is really so preposterous as to be comic. We can all understand how a man forgives offenses against himself. You tread on my toe and I forgive you, you steal my money and I forgive you. But what should we make of a man, himself unrobbed and untrodden on, who announced that he forgave you for treading on other men's toes and stealing other men's money? Asinine fatuity is the kindest description we should give of his conduct. Yet this is what Jesus did. He told people that their sins were forgiven, and never waited to consult all the other people whom their sins had undoubtedly injured. He unhesitatingly behaved as if He was the party chiefly concerned, the person chiefly offended in all offenses. This makes sense only if He really was the God whose laws are broken and whose love is wounded in every sin. In the mouth of any speaker who is not God, these words would imply what I can only regard as a silliness and conceit unrivalled by any other character in history.

2. Another extraordinary claim that Jesus made was that one day He would **judge the world** (Mt 25:31-32) *and* be the criterion for that judgment.

that what happened to us on that Day of Judgment would depend on how we respond to Jesus in this life. (Mt 25:40, 45)

For a mere man to make such a claim would be preposterous !!
Here we have another indirect claim of Jesus
to have the identity of Almighty God !

C. Jesus even made **direct** claims !

1. to be the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God

When the High Priest asked Jesus on the historic night of His arrest, "Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One" Jesus said "I AM" The High Priest tore his clothes. Why do we need more witnesses?, he asked. You have heard the blasphemy!". (Mark 14:61-64)

In this account, it appears that Jesus was put to death for the assertion that He made about Himself. A claim tantamount to a claim to be God was blasphemy in Jewish eyes and worthy of death.

2. to be God the Son

Jesus said, "I tell you the truth. Before Abraham was, I AM" At this, they picked up stones to stone Him, but Jesus slipped away from the temple grounds." (John 8:58)

Note: The Jewish hearers would have clearly recognized this as a claim to be God since I AM was the name God used for Himself when He revealed Himself to Moses (Ex 3:14) No wonder they picked up stones!

When Thomas, one of the Disciples, knelt down before Jesus and said, “My Lord and my God” (John 20:28) Jesus did not correct him.

Rather, Jesus said, “Because you have seen me you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen me and yet have believed.”

In fact, Jesus admonished Thomas for being so slow to get the point. “Stop doubting and believe”. (John 21:27)

If you only want to remember one passage on this subject, remember John 10:33

On this occasion, when the crowd started to stone Jesus, He asked, “Why are you stoning me”? They replied that they were stoning him “because you, a mere man, **claim to be God**”.

His enemies clearly thought that this was exactly what Jesus was declaring.

From these three vantage points;

The Personal “I am” claims of Jesus
the indirect claims
the direct claims

Jesus clearly,

although He never put it crudely enough to say “I am God” did consider Himself to be God

III. But one’s claim to be God does not make one God

Psychiatric hospitals are full of people who claim to be something they are not – Napoleon, Mother Theresa, God...

Nicky Gumbel – author of the Alpha Course – tells a story of Margaret Thatcher when she was in office, who went into a mental hospital and greeted someone, saying “How do you do? I am Margaret Thatcher, the Prime Minister” to which the patient responded: “Don’t worry, Madame. You’ll get over it. I was like that when I came in here too.”

So how can we test the claims of Jesus?

C.S. Lewis proposed that there are 3 logical possibilities

1. He knew He was not God but fooled people into thinking He was – which would make Him an imposter
2. He was not God but thought He was – which would make Him deluded, if not insane
3. His claims were true

Lewis put it this way:

A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on a level with a man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse...but let us not come up with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to. (Mere Christianity)

Liar, lunatic or Lord?

In order to assess which of these 3 possibilities is right we need to examine the evidence we have about His life in 5 areas:

His teachings
His works
His character
His fulfillment of OT prophecy
His resurrection

1. His Teachings

Even those who do not believe in Jesus as Lord or God acknowledge His teachings to be the greatest teaching that has ever fallen from anyone's lips. You've probably heard

Many people say

"I live by the Golden Rule" - not knowing that "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" was uniquely spoken by Jesus.
or "It is more blessed to give than to receive..."

Bernard Ramm, an American professor of theology said about the teachings of Jesus

They are read more, quoted more, loved more, believed more and translated more because they are the greatest words ever spoken....Their greatness lies in the pure lucid spirituality in dealing clearly, definitively and authoritatively with the greatest problems that throb in the human breast...No other man's words have the appeal of Jesus' words because no other man can answer these fundamental human questions as Jesus answered them. They are the kind of words and the kind of answers we would expect God to give."

(Protestant Christian Evidence, Moody Press)

The teachings of Jesus form the foundation of the very best of our western civilization.

In the last 2000 years, we have improved in virtually every field of science, yet no one has improved on the moral teaching of Jesus.

Could that teaching have come from a madman or an imposter?

2. His Works

Sometimes people say that Christianity is boring...
but surely that is a commentary on preachers or parents...

Can you imagine spending a day with Jesus??
When He went to a wedding, and the host ran out of Gallo,
He took the water and turned it into Chateau Lafite !
When He went on a picnic with His friends and found that there were
5000 extra guests, He took one boys basket and fed them all!
When He went to the beach, if someone said shall we bring water
skis, He said, No, today we'll walk on water.
When He went fishing with His friends they caught so many fish
that they couldn't haul in the nets.
When a storm hits out of nowhere, He told the wind and the waves
to be still – and they were.
When He went hospital visiting, He touched and healed – and
lame people lept and danced and shouted.

Jesus said that the miracles He performed were, in themselves,
evidence of who He was.
In John 10:38 He said it this way:

Even if you don't believe in *me*, believe the *miracles* that
you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I
in the Father.

Real power,
always and only for good,
only to bless !..
only to serve !
not likely the work of an imposter !

(In fact, when I read Dan Brown's words...
"Jesus was of the House of David, a descendant of King
Soloman, King of the Jews. By marrying into the powerful
House of Benjamin (of Mary Magdalene) Jesus fused two
royal bloodlines, creating a potent political union with the
potential of making a legitimate claim to the throne and
restoring the line of kings as it was under Soloman." p.249

... I wonder if Mr. Brown has ever really read the words
or examined the life of Jesus, whose final act
before the cross was to wash His disciples' feet and
send them out into the world to do the same.)

Yet it as not just His teachings or miracles
that made His works so impressive.

It was His *motivation*, His heart
His love, especially for the loveless !
...which leads to an examination of His character

3. His Character

Of all the things that critics question about Jesus, it is never His character.

Even non- Christians like Bernard Levin have been quoted as saying:

Is not the nature of Christ, in the words of the New Testament, enough to pierce to the soul anyone with a soul to be pierced? he still looms over the world, his message still clear, his pity still infinite, his consolation still effective, his world still full of glory, wisdom and love.

Here was a man who exemplified
supreme unselfishness – but never self pity
humility – but not weakness
joy – but never at another’s expense
kindness – but not indulgence

a man whose loving heart could not be compromised,
even when He was in outrageous pain –
even on a cross.

“Father forgive them. They don’t know that they are doing”
(Luke 22:34)

Nothing in the teachings or work or character to suggest any unbalance...

4. There was something else distinctive about Jesus’ life:

He fulfilled over 300 prophecies

spoken by different voices over 500 years !

Even if He had tried to fit Himself into OT prophecies... 300??
many of which He could not have controlled
because they had to do with His birth and His death.

For instance,

Micah had foretold the place of His birth

(Micah 5:2)

Isaiah had foretold His exact manner of beating and death

(Isaiah 53)

Wilbur Smith, an American theological writer says:

There are no other founders of any religion or cult that can
“rightly identify any ancient text specifically foretelling
their appearance”.

(The Incomparable Book, Beacon Publications, 1961)

5. Finally, any of Jesus’ claim to be Messiah,

Son of God and God the Son

must be evaluated in light of **the Resurrection**

The physical resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the cornerstone
of Christianity,

and, therefore, is wide open to doubt and conjecture.

I'll never forget the evening when a dear English friend came to NY on business and out to our house for dinner. He is a brilliant man, deeply thoughtful, asked how I liked seminary, etc. Then said "Oh, but you know Jesus never really died on the cross. He escaped and had a family and some of His descendants live in our next village in England.

Since I had never really questioned the Resurrection, I had absolutely no response ! He really challenged me!

(Of course, I didn't know that my friend was not the only one who explained Jesus' absence from the tomb by thinking he had been taken away:

Dr. Trevor Lloyd Davies once headlined in the London Post "JESUS DID NOT DIE ON THE CROSS")

I wish I'd thought then of the following 4 categories of evidence which make Davies report and my friend's persuasion very unlikely !

1) His absence from the tomb

Was Jesus Really dead?

*Jesus had undergone a Roman flogging which killed most victims – and then had been nailed on a cross for 6 hours. Unlikely that a man in that condition could push away a stone probably weighing a ton.

*The soldiers who took Him down from the cross would have been, themselves, liable to the death penalty if they had taken Him down before he was dead

*Furthermore, Scripture has retained a detail of his death which could not have been understood as proof of death when it was recorded: "One of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water." (John 19:34)

This appears to be the separation of the clot and serum which we know *today* is strong medical evidence that Jesus was dead.

Christianity believes these details confirm that **Jesus was dead when taken from the cross.**

*It has been argued that the disciples stole the body and began the rumor that He had risen from the grave.

The inarguable answer to this is the fact that these very same disciples went on to be beaten, killed and martyred because of the conviction that He lived !!

none of which they would have endured for what they knew to be untrue.

*Some have argued that it was the authorities who stole the body.

This seems most improbable of all since if they had,
they could so easily have produced the stolen body to
squash the rumors when they arose.

2) Appearances to the Disciples

More than the evidence of His absence from the grave, His
alleged appearances to the Disciples must be considered.

Scripture records that Jesus appeared to His disciples
on 11 different occasions
over a period of 6 weeks

and that over 550 people saw the risen Christ !!

Were these hallucinations??

It's possible for 1 or 2 to have the same hallucination,
but 550 ??

In addition, hallucinations have no objective reality
- like seeing a ghost.

But Jesus

could be touched

He ate a piece of broiled fish

He cooked the disciples breakfast on a charcoal fire

3) And then there was the **immediate effect** of Jesus' rising from the dead

The Church (the body of believers, not the structure)
grew exponentially !!

Michael Green puts it this way:

The Church ... beginning from a handful of uneducated
fishermen and tax gatherers, swept across the whole known
world in the next 300 years. It is a perfectly amazing story of
peaceful revolution that has no parallel in the history of the
world. It came about because Christians were able to say to
inquirers: 'Jesus did not only die for you. He is alive! You
can meet him and discover for yourself the reality we are
talking about!' They did, and joined the church and the
church, born from the Easter grave, spread everywhere."
(Evangelism Through the Local Church, 1990)

which brings us to the 4th and final criteria by which to judge the
Resurrection of Jesus

4) **The experience of Christians down through the ages !**

Countless millions of people have experienced the risen
Jesus Christ.

People of every nation and color and race and tribe
every socio-economic group, every class,
every persuasion
yet they all unite in a common experience of the
risen Jesus

I'll never forget the anguish of being challenged in seminary on whether or not Jesus had actually spoken the words from the cross that were ascribed to Him –
- “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.” -
since, after all, “there was no proof.”

All I could say was “I know He spoke them – because He spoke them to me - and that may not be proof enough for you, but it is for me.”

I don't know what would be proof for *you*
that Jesus was who He said He was...

Maybe it's the head knowledge that we've shared this morning:

the evidence that Jesus was a man, and more;
that He was a man who claimed the identity of God.
and the evidence that
by his life and death
and the effect on His disciples and followers
He proved that His claims were compellingly true

I believe the whole weight of His teachings,
His works,
His character,
His fulfillment of OT prophecy
and
His conquest of death
make suggestions to the contrary illogical
and hard to believe.

To the contrary, they lend the strongest possible support to
Jesus' own consciousness of being a man whose
identity was God.

C.S. Lewis, always the logical one, sums it up like this:

We are faced then with a frightening alternative. The man we are talking about was (and is) just what He said or else a lunatic or something worse. Now it seems to me obvious that he was neither a lunatic nor a fiend; and consequently however strange or terrifying or unlikely it may seem, I have to accept the view that he was and is God. God has landed on this enemy occupied world in human form.

Maybe, on the other hand,
your proof would have to be
not head knowledge, not logic
but a heart's experience of the Living Christ.

If that's the case,
if you want to know experientially
that Jesus is Lord,
that He is risen and alive *for you*,
just ask Him
and He will give you all the proof you need !

CHRISTIANITY AND THE DA VINCI CODE

Teaching #4 WHO IS JESUS?

TRUE OR FALSE?

1. “Constantine held a famous ecumenical gathering known as the Council of Nicea....Until that moment in history, Jesus was viewed by His followers as a mortal prophet...a great and powerful man, but a man nonetheless. A mortal.” p.233
2. “Jesus was of the House of David, a descendant of King Solomon, King of the Jews. By marrying into the powerful House of Benjamin (of Mary Magdalene) Jesus fused two royal bloodlines, creating a potent political union with the potential of making a legitimate claim to the throne and restoring the line of kings as it was under Solomon.” p.249
3. “Nobody is saying Christ was a fraud.” p.234