



DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

7643 Huron River Drive

Dexter, MI 48130

734-426-8480

Cracking the Code: The Secret Gospels

By Matt Hook

1 Corinthians 8:1-8

June 11, 2006

In *The Da Vinci Code*, Teabing, the wise old scholar says “We should not let the story of Christianity be dictated by the winners.” (meaning those who held beliefs that line up with the creeds—orthodox.) Never mind that he conspired to blackmail the entire Catholic church and oversee the murder of a dozen people... In other words, how was the New Testament made?

We have to remember the landscape of the times. And we don't need to be taught it so much as we need to be invited to look around. 1st Century Corinth very much reflects 21st Century America. We have our barbarians. We have a million temples in which to worship; you don't even have to go to Ann Arbor. You just need to go to your computer. All kinds of issues were out there. Listen to what Paul writes to the Christ-followers in Corinth, in about 65AD.

1 Corinthians 8:1 “Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. 2 The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. 3 But the man who loves God is known by God. 4 So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one. 5 For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”), 6 yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live. 7 But not everyone knows this. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat such food they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. 8 But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.”

Do you see how practical the faith is? What about those Christians eating in friends' homes? Should they not eat because the food would have been sacrificed to pagan gods or goddesses? You've got to go back to basic truths. It's the same for us today: How do you deal with disputes like the *Da Vinci Code*? With knowledge? Yes. But not just knowledge. First, be affirming in love. In any relationship, and marriage especially, if you handle the dispute only with who's right, you miss any opportunity to help the other person love God better. I think that's why we love this book. It attacks the established authorities who think they've had it right for so long. An article in *US News and World Report* quotes a reader of *The Da Vinci Code* admitting: “I knew that many of the things in Brown's book weren't true, but I just wanted them to be.”

It should come as no surprise that the writers the Holy Spirit used to produce the NT weren't the only ones writing about Jesus. We know that Paul wrote letters that weren't included. Not everything “made the cut”. Some writings were turned down because they contained false teachings, or were late (post-1st Century works) or because the authorship was questionable.

Absent from the secret writings is the reason Jesus came--to offer Himself as a sacrifice for sin. Because the Gnostic writers denied the humanity and sacrifice of Jesus, they devised alternative accounts. They also rejected the Old Testament. Their view was that 'secret knowledge,' "enlightenment" was the key to salvation. Yet the Good News is no secret! It is for all people, not just Christians. The world needs Jesus. The Christians also need Jesus!

The Gnostic writings are 2nd & 3rd Century at the earliest, whereas the NT writings were authored in the 1st Century by the Apostles and their close co-workers. The Gnostic gospels have no accounting because they are "secret gospels." The Gnostic writers excluded themselves from the NT. Paul's Epistle to the Colossians expressly refutes Gnostic teachings as heresy: "*Don't let anyone lead you astray (take you captive) through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which comes from human reasoning rather than according to Christ*" (2:8).

What do the secret gospels teach? There are several common themes.

First, they Gnosis or Knowledge—the idea that some Christians had access to mysteries or exclusive teaching that others did not possess. It was only given to a few, the spiritual. Each gnosis is a mystery unique to the one person that received it. This stands in direct opposition to the New Testament texts, which were given openly for all of us to consider. Before these were recorded in the canon of Scripture, they were read over and over to the groups of Christ followers that were forming. Our Gospels held no claim to "insider" knowledge, like the Gnostic texts did. The revelation in the Bible was presented for all to consider, accept, or reject, while setting forth the benefits and consequences. There also was no dualism between pure knowledge and the creation as all evil. God said creation was good, although sin corrupted it. It's not just getting access to secret knowledge. (Something we in the church a long time sometimes forget!)

Second, the Cosmos and levels of worlds— Ideas are pure, the physical world is bad, meaning that God the pure spirit has no contact with the material world, and in opposition to this god is the wicked "creator" of the fallen world, who falsely believes he's the only god. There are multiple godlike beings and one of them created humanity. And only those humans with "the divine spark" in them are able to be freed from their physical bodies.

The Person of Jesus, the Cross, and Salvation—the Gnostics saw two Jesus': the living Lord and the human substitute Jesus. The Savior didn't go through this; the human Jesus did...and he was wrong to do it. And in resurrection form, Jesus was just a phantom, more divine, not less. God did not enter the creation. Jesus himself was separated into the physical man who suffered on the cross, and a being of pure light that watched it all.

Personal Spirituality—The Gnostics put down those who don't "get it." (How many of us do the same thing?!) Those who are enlightened are "from the life". The issue is possession of secret knowledge. The Gnostics wanted to say that no one could question their special revelations, no matter how opposed to the Hebrew Scriptures or other Christian writings they were.

"We should not let the story of Christianity be dictated by the winners." (meaning those who held beliefs that line up with the creeds—orthodox.)

"Christianity, as we now know it, is really a creation of the 4th century, not the first."

What did Christians believe and when did they begin believing it?

- Did you know Galatians may be the earliest New Testament writing? Paul's writings date between 50 and 68AD, almost 300 years before Nicea. In Galatians, he speaks of the risen Jesus. His writing shows others shared this belief. Even the latest of the New Testament writings, the Gospel of John, refers to Jesus as God.
- To say that the idea that Jesus was divine came from a vote taken 300 years after the time of Jesus is simply bad history, based on all the evidence. The view has clear expression in the documents written within generations of the time of Jesus and has its roots to his closest followers.

What took place at before the Council of Nicea in 325?

The Nicene Creed was important. It affirmed the core of the faith. It was, in part, to control what was to be believed.

- The collection of letters and writings we call the New Testament gained momentum in this period. As a result, the documents, or "secret gospels" were destroyed, and their influence waned.
- Basically, the Nicene Creed put in precise language what had been expressed for years. The 4 Gospels we have today were highlighted at this council had been solidly established and recognized for over a century. The vote at Nicea, rather than deciding the church's beliefs, simply affirmed and officially recognized what was already the church's dominant view.

Who was Constantine?

- A key figure. His rule was a turning point in Christian history. Before him, Christians suffered persecution and martyrdom. It all changed after him. The cathedrals and other places of worship were transformed into sacred places to worship Jesus Christ.

How was the New Testament put together?

- We have to look at the writing of the documents in the 50s—90sAD until they were fully recognized in the middle of the 300sAD, when Athanasius lists the 27 New Testament books as they exist today. But the 4 Gospels of Jesus' life and ministry were listed together constantly by the end of the 2nd century, because of their roots, their content, and usage. We know this because the writings of the 100s and 200sAD identify groups calling to identify core beliefs and documents. It is during this time the lists of books date from this period.
- There were 4 factors that drove the official church writings to be named: that they had apostolic roots (and could be traced to those who were with Jesus); they found wide spread usage (each Gospel was seen as too well-established and too important to be combined into one account), alternative expressions of the faith appeared that disagreed with the basic beliefs of the earliest writings. Super-apostles—emphasize self, revelations and self-righteousness; Radical Judaizers—Jewish required; Montanism—Law, prophecies to make Jesus return; Gnostics—special knowledge Docetists—Jesus divine, not human; Ebionites—Jesus human, not divine; Arians—Jesus demi-god

Scholars referred back to these specific documents as the ones that most reflect the earliest faith to dispute these false teachings.

- And finally persecution. Between the 100s and early 300s, before Constantine, the Christians and their books were ordered to be burned or destroyed. An official decree from Emperor Diocletian in AD 303, orders the books to be destroyed. In order to carry that out, authorities had to identify and be able to name them. Those who would defy such an order needed to know which books were worth dying for.
- By the time of Constantine, these 4 Gospels were already ancient.

Unlike most other things in our consumer society, you can't pick and choose. There was never a

time when most church leaders were picking and choosing from dozens of gospels.

Let us proclaim the Gospel—not secret to anyone, but open to all. Let us admit our need for God and for forgiveness. We were created to be dependent upon God. The way out of our secrets is to acknowledge what God has said about us through the message of Jesus' work for us.

We call this acknowledgement faith. It is faith in Jesus the Savior. It is faith that saves us and all of creation, because it embraces life as God created it to be. This faith receives life as a gracious gift that God makes available to us through the way Jesus has made. It turns your life into an expression of gratitude. God's acceptance of us is rooted in no special knowledge of our own, but in God's own selfless act of sacrifice and love. Those closest to Jesus gave their lives to tell us his story. We must read their story, for their story is also our story.....

Close with the DVD "Story" – A multi-media version of The Apostle's Creed