

EDITORIAL

No one can accuse our Society of dealing with irrelevant issues. This past November, the topic of our annual conference was, "What Is Truth?" Following the presidential address by Greg Beale, the present volume gathers together the four plenary addresses delivered on this subject from a biblical, systematic theological, philosophical, and hermeneutical perspective. The question of truth continues to be an all-important item of discussion in our postmodern world, and no one is better equipped to address it than those who believe in the inerrant and inspired Word of God.

The topic of the upcoming annual ETS meeting, "Christianity in the Early Centuries," likewise is a pressing topic whose relevance has recently been underscored by Dan Brown's bestselling book *The Da Vinci Code*. The fact that several of our members have taken the time to write book-length responses from an evangelical Christian perspective shows that many perceive the debate surrounding *The Da Vinci Code* to be a golden opportunity to deal with the issues it addresses, including the deity of Christ and issues related to the formation of the canon.

As ETS vice president and program chairman Edwin Yamauchi writes in his Call for papers, "More specifically, we are concerned about the increasing challenge presented by Walter Bauer's thesis of competing Christianities which has been publicized by Elaine Pagels and Bart Ehrman, and has now been widely popularized through *The Da Vinci Code*. Our sub-theme would therefore be: 'Orthodoxy and Heresy in the Early Church: Missing Scriptures? Missing Christianities?'"

In fact, there appears to be a direct connection between last year's theme of "What Is Truth?" and this year's theme of "Christianity in the Early Centuries" as Professor Yamauchi has defined it. If Jesus did not know himself to be divine and never claimed divinity for himself, but his divinity is merely a later projection by the institutional Church, this would dramatically alter the way we perceive the question of truth. Many of you will already be familiar with the following interchange from *The Da Vinci Code* that takes up this question:

"My dear," Teabing declared, "until *that* moment in history [the Council of Nicea], Jesus was viewed by His followers as a mortal prophet . . . a great and powerful *man*, but a man nonetheless. A mortal."

"Not the Son of God?"

"Right," Teabing said. "Jesus' establishment as 'the Son of God' was officially proposed and voted on by the Council of Nicea."

"Hold on. You're saying Jesus' divinity was the result of a *vote*?"

"A relatively close vote at that," Teabing added. "Nonetheless, establishing Christ's divinity was critical to the further unification of the Roman empire

and to the new Vatican power base. By officially endorsing Jesus as the Son of God, Constantine turned Jesus into a deity who existed beyond the scope of the human world, an entity whose power was unchallengeable. This not only precluded further pagan challenges to Christianity, but now the followers of Christ were able to redeem themselves *only* via the established sacred channel—the Roman Catholic Church.” [p. 233]

Was Jesus, then, considered to be a “mere mortal” by his first followers? Was his divinity the result of a fourth-century vote, and a “relatively close vote at that”? What if the vote had gone the other way? The way Teabing puts it, elevating Jesus to the status of deity was merely a political ploy concocted by Constantine to centralize control in his hands and to shore up his power base. What, if any, evidence is there for these claims? And how are we to evaluate them? Could this hypothesis possibly be true?

Paul, of course, taught the deity of Christ almost immediately (1 Cor 8:6; Rom 9:5; Phil 2:6, 11; Titus 2:13), as did other New Testament writers (Mark 1:1; John 1:1, 18; 8:58; 10:30; 20:28; Heb 1:8–9; 2 Pet 1:1; 1 John 5:20). The early Christians prayed in Jesus’ name and baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One may disagree with Jesus’ and the early Christians’ claim that Jesus is God, but it seems hard to deny that they made this claim in the first place and that many accepted it and gave their lives for this belief.

Another related claim made by the author of *The Da Vinci Code* is that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene and that the two had a daughter named Sarah. Brown’s evidence for this startling claim that, if true, would likewise radically recast the nature of Christianity is the Gnostic Gospels of Philip and of Mary Magdalene. According to these second or third-century documents, Mary Magdalene was Jesus’ “companion” (*koinōnos*) and he loved her more than the other disciples and used to kiss her often on her [. . .].

The problem, however, is that not even the very documents Brown adduces claim that Mary was Jesus’ wife. In fact, the Gospel of Philip expresses the bizarre notion that (spiritual) conception occurs through kissing (59:1–5). If so, Jesus and Mary may have had “spiritual offspring,” but not physical children. What is more, the word *koinōnos* does not mean “wife” (*gynē*), but “close associate” in the sense that Mary, a non-relative, was part of Jesus’ inner circle (59:6–10).

The Da Vinci Code’s reliance on two Gnostic Gospels in the place of the four canonical Gospels, and its thesis that the former, rather than the latter, are accurate and were marginalized and excluded from the canon only in the fourth century raises another critical issue. As mentioned, in many respects this is Walter Bauer’s thesis of a movement from heterodoxy to orthodoxy revived in popular garb, dressed in form of a conspiracy theory according to which the Catholic Church suppressed both women and the truth about Jesus and Christianity.

For those concerned for truth—real truth, historical truth—the present issue, with the presidential and the plenary addresses from last November’s conference, and the upcoming annual meeting, with its focus on “Christianity in the Early Centuries,” should prove of great interest. Truth may at

times be elusive, or unwelcome, but the question of truth ought never to be dismissed lightly, as Pilate and many before and after him discovered. “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John 17:3).

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P.S.: After writing this editorial, and just before this issue went to press, news reached me that Stanley J. Grenz, ETS member and prolific scholar, has died suddenly and unexpectedly. I did not know Stan well personally, though we did correspond on quite a few occasions and I had the privilege of editing several of his essays for publication in this *Journal*. I would like to take this opportunity to express my sincere condolences to Stan’s family and to those who were closest to him and to voice respect for his creativity and excellence in scholarship. While I disagree with Stan on many things, I was saddened by the news of his untimely death and will miss his irenic spirit and his cordial demeanor. Shortly before his death, I offered Stan the opportunity to respond to a forthcoming article on foundationalism accepted for publication in this *Journal*. Stan eagerly embraced the challenge and agreed to respond. As far as I know, he did not have time to put pen to paper. No doubt others will take up the challenge. For now, as the Preacher wrote long ago, “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; . . . a time to mourn, and a time to dance” (Eccl 3:1–2, 4)—and, if I may add, “a time to engage in vigorous scholarly debate and a time to lay aside our theological differences” and to pay tribute to the work of God in Stanley J. Grenz.