

WILL THE REAL JESUS PLEASE STAND UP?

Scriptures: I Corinthians 15:1-11; Galatians 1:6-9

Here is a television trivia question. (Hold up card) This is an actual prop from an old television—a show that any of you over 40 will probably remember. Can you name the show? The sermon title will give you a clue. This is an actual card used by one of the celebrity contestants on the television show “To Tell the Truth.” While I was in seminary, my wife, parents, and I went to a taping of the show in New York City at NBC studios. They gave these away as souvenirs at the end of the show. I think this one came from Bill Cullen or Kitty Carlisle.

If you are under 40, let me tell you about this show. Three people would take their seat at a panel, all claiming to be the same person who had done some unusual thing. For example, the three people might all claim to be John Doe, the scientist who invented Teflon, or Jane Doe, the first woman to climb Mt. Everest. A panel of celebrities would then ask them questions to figure out which of the three was the real person. They would vote for their choice on these little cards. Then the host would ask, “Will the real John Doe please stand up?”

This question could be posed about Jesus. Will the real Jesus please stand up? Every year or so, usually around Easter, someone comes up with new, previously hidden information about the “real” Jesus. This year it is a new translation by the National Geographic Society of an ancient Egyptian document called *The Gospel of Judas*. In this supposedly lost gospel, Judas is the only disciple who understands Jesus. Just before the Last Supper Judas says to Jesus, “I know who you are and where you have come from. You are from the immortal realm of Barbelo.” Startled by this insight, Jesus says to Judas, “Step away from the others and I shall tell you the mysteries of the Kingdom” (quoted in *The New Yorker*, April 17, 2006, p. 80).

The mystery, it turns out, is that the God of the Old Testament, the God who created the world, is not Jesus’ real father. The God who created the world is an evil god who gave us suffering. Jesus is from a realm called Barbelo that is purely spiritual, having nothing to do with physical, earthly life. To get back to this realm, Jesus must shed his earthly body, and he asks Judas to help him by betraying him, so that he will be arrested and executed.

This gospel not only makes Judas into a hero, it makes Easter into a misunderstanding. According to *The Gospel of Judas* Jesus’ body did not rise from the dead at Easter. Jesus got rid of his body at Easter. Jesus left his body behind in the tomb while his spirit was released to go back to Barbelo, a realm that has nothing to do with human bodily life. According to *The Gospel of Judas* human bodily life is not a good thing, it is a bad thing created by an evil god, and the best thing we can do is get rid of it.

This is not the same Jesus we read about last week in the gospel of Luke when Jesus rose from the dead, body and all. The tomb, you remember, was empty. Nor is this the same Jesus we read about this week in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. Paul says,

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas (which is the Aramaic name for Peter), then to the twelve.

The Jesus described in the Bible did not come to get rid of human bodily life. He came to redeem it. He came to make human bodily life the good thing God meant it to be when his Father created it. That is a totally different Jesus than the Jesus described in *The Gospel of Judas*. So which is the real Jesus?

The show “To Tell the Truth” usually had the same celebrities each week trying to guess who was real and who was fake. As a result, they got fairly good at it. More often than not Bill Cullen, Kitty Carlisle, and the other contestants could figure out who was lying and who was telling the truth.

The same was true for early Christians. At this point, let me set the record straight. Thanks to Dan Brown in his book *The Da Vinci Code*, many people have a false understanding of how the books of the Bible were chosen. *The Da Vinci Code* suggests that church leaders in the time of Constantine got together in a smoke filled room and decided among themselves which books to include in the Bible and which to throw out. They suppressed the books they did not like, so that Christians would not find out about them: books like *The Gospel of Judas* and *The Gospel of Mary* and other gospels mentioned in *The Da Vinci Code*.

The truth, however, is that these books were not secretly suppressed. They were known and talked about by many Christians in the second century. *The Gospel of Judas* was probably written in the middle of the second century around 150 A. D., and we have a record of a bishop of the church named Irenaeus telling his people about it in 180 A. D. He told them it was a piece of junk, but most of them had figured that out for themselves.

Writings like *The Gospel of Judas* or *The Gospel of Mary* or the other so-called lost gospels mentioned in *The Da Vinci Code* were not suppressed by church leaders. They were rejected by people in the pew. They were read by many Christians in the second century and dismissed as stupid.

Let me try to put this into perspective. This morning we read from two books of the Bible, both written by the apostle Paul around 54 A. D. In other words, these books were written within 20 years of Jesus’ life on earth. At the time Paul wrote these books, there were many people around who actually knew Jesus. Paul talked to some of them. In Galatians Paul says he actually talked with Cephas (or Peter) and James to make sure he had the story straight. In I Corinthians 15 Cephas and James are specifically mentioned as two of the people who saw the risen Jesus. Paul actually talked to people who were there.

It would be like me writing about the ministry of Harlan Gilliland. Harlan was the pastor here at Hamblen Park 20 years ago. How many of you here actually knew Harlan Gilliland? Raise your hand. Could I get away with inventing stories about Harlan Gilliland, when there are so many of you here who actually knew him?

The same was true for the apostle Paul. He could not make up things about Jesus. He was surrounded by people who actually knew Jesus. That is why he says to the Corinthians, “For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received.” Paul is not inventing a new Jesus. He is telling us about the Jesus known by the people who lived with him.

We don’t know for sure when the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were written. Most Bible scholars think it was some time around 70 to 90 A. D. But these gospels were also written at a time when there were people around who knew Jesus. These four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were almost universally accepted by Christians of the first and second century as faithful witnesses to the real Jesus.

In contrast *The Gospel of Judas* was written a century later by a group in Egypt called the Gnostics, which is a Greek word meaning “knowledge.” Several of the so-called gospels mentioned in *The Da Vinci Code* were written by the same group. The Gnostics claimed that they had secret knowledge about Jesus and secret keys to salvation that had been lost by the traditional Christian church but had now been recovered.

Does that sound familiar: a group that believes it has secret knowledge about Jesus and secret keys to salvation that have been lost by the traditional Christian church and now recovered? The modern equivalent to the Gnostic gospels is the *Book of Mormon*. Like the Gnostic gospels, the *Book of Mormon* claims to be the true gospel that had been lost for centuries by the traditional Christian church but was suddenly discovered in 1820 on some golden tablets buried in upstate New York. These golden tablets tell the story of how the American Indians were direct descendants of the Israelites who came from Jerusalem in 600 B. C. and that Jesus himself came to America after his resurrection.

Now I don’t mean to be disrespectful. I know many fine people in the Mormon Church. But just on the simple grounds of creditability, which picture of Jesus do you think has the better chance of being authentic: the picture of Jesus in the *Book of Mormon* discovered in upstate New York 1800 years after Jesus’ time, or the picture of Jesus in *The Gospel of Judas* written in Egypt a hundred years after Jesus time, or the picture of Jesus in the Bible written 20 to 50 years after Jesus’ time by people who actually knew him or knew people who knew him?

You don’t have to wait for the real Jesus to stand up. He already has.

- Ken Onstot