

REDEEMER

R E P O R T

MAY 2006

THE EXAMINED CHRISTIAN FAITH

BY TIM KELLER

Recently “The Lost Gospel of Judas,” another of the ‘Gnostic gospels,’ was rolled out with an enormous amount of fanfare. Elaine Pagels says this book shows that ancient Christianity was very diverse in its beliefs. There wasn’t just one ‘orthodox’ view of Jesus—according to her, there were many competing ways of thinking about Jesus. On top of all this, *The DaVinci Code* comes out as a movie this month. The basic assumption behind both the book, the movie, and the hype surrounding “the Gospel of Judas” is an account of the origins of Christianity that a small number of scholars have been trying to promote for almost two centuries, but which has not gotten much popular traction—until now.

That account goes like this.

A) The original Jesus was simply a very human teacher of love and wisdom. B) After his death many different, conflicting accounts of his person and work began circulating. There

were different parties and viewpoints about who he was. Some claimed he was divine and risen from the dead, others that he was just a human teacher who lived on spiritually in the hearts of his disciples. C) After a power struggle, one party won (the “divine Jesus” view), and they selected and created texts that promoted their views, and suppressed and destroyed all the alternative texts. D) Recently, some of these suppressed, alternate views of Jesus have come to light—like the ‘Gnostic’ gospels of Thomas and Judas. This shows, at least, that early Christianity was very diverse in its understandings of Jesus. Conclusion—no one really knows what Jesus said and did. We can’t look at the Bible as authoritative over our life and beliefs.

Despite all the hype, the actual evidence for this scenario is virtually non-existent. The press releases play down the fact that the canonical gospels were all written within the

lifetime of eyewitnesses to Jesus’ ministry, while every one of the Gnostic texts (they really can’t be called “Gospels,” for reasons I will explain below) were written one to two centuries later. As Adam Gopnik wrote in the April 17, 2006, issue of *The New Yorker*, the gospel of Judas “no more challenges the basis of the Church’s faith than the discovery of a document from the nineteenth century written in Ohio and defending King George would be a challenge to the basis of American democracy. There are no new beliefs, no new arguments, and certainly no new evidence in the papyrus that would cause anyone to doubt who did not doubt before.” (“Jesus Laughed,” April 17, 2006.)

Also, the stories in the press seldom explain that Gnosticism was a religion that believed the exact opposite of what first century Jews (including Jesus and the disciples) all believed about spiritual reality. Gnostics believed that the material world was evil, and that the

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resurrection of the physical body was both unthinkable as well as undesirable, and that salvation was liberation from the body. It is unlikely in the extreme that any Jews would have adopted this very Greek philosophy of life.

But does this mean that Elaine Pagels is right—that early Christianity was very diverse with all sorts of widely different beliefs about who Jesus was? On the contrary, N.T. Wright in *The Resurrection of the Son of God* has demonstrated that first century Christianity was remarkable for its *lack* of party division over the person of Christ. There is not a shred of evidence that belief in the resurrection and the divinity of Jesus evolved over time through a process of argument and debate and conflict. Rather, all Christians immediately worshipped Jesus as the risen, divine Son. 1 Corinthians 15 and Philippians 2, documents written within 15–25 years of Jesus’ death, demonstrate this conclusively.

It can be discouraging for Christians to read press reports about these things. Here you have smart people with Ph.D.’s (like N.T. Wright) saying that there is no evidence of diversity and debate about the divinity of Jesus, but on the other hand you have smart Ph.D.’s saying the opposite. The temptation is to throw your hands in the air and

say, “How is anyone supposed to know who is right?” My answer is—*the same way you know anything is right*. You simply *have* to read and examine things more closely.

When some scholars say that “Christianity in the ancient world was very diverse” they aren’t actually refuting N.T. Wright’s evidence that the earliest Christians all believed in the Resurrection and the divinity of Christ. They don’t have any evidence of their own to do that. Rather, they are making bald assertions, unsupported by facts. They are only talking about Gnosticism and Marcionism and other sects that developed in the 2nd and 3rd centuries. Does the rise of these much later cults constitute evidence that the original followers of Jesus saw him as a mere human teacher and that the concept of his divinity only developed over a long period of time (as is stated in *The DaVinci Code*?) Not at all. These kinds of claims are stated in such a way as to appear much more formidable challenges to orthodox faith than they really are.

Plato was supposed to have said, “*The unexamined life is not worth living.*” That was Plato’s way to promote the study of philosophy. That may or may not be true, but I propose that every Christian today, whether you consider yourself a ‘lay person’

or not, needs to study theology. Christians who are confused by books on text criticism and the formation of the Biblical canon simply haven’t been willing to take the time to do some basic, introductory Biblical and theological studies. The sermons on Sunday will not be enough to help you lead an examined Christian life. You need to be in a small group, you need to read at least introductory texts on the Bible and theology, you need to take classes in our School of Discipleship, in the Academy of Christian Thought, or even at the local City Seminary of New York. Don’t lead an unexamined Christian life.

Oh, and the reason I don’t dignify these Gnostic texts with the title “Gospels”? “Gospel” means “good news,” of which these documents have none. They don’t call themselves “gospels” and neither should anyone else. No resurrection, no salvation from sin, no reconciliation with God through the death and life of Jesus. With the Gnostics, all salvation is accomplished by you, yourself, in adopting the secret knowledge which will lead you to truth. These documents are just evidence of an old, tired heresy which failed to gain much following in ancient times, while the true Gospel of Jesus Christ changed lives and changed the world.

REDEEMER REPORT

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| HUNTER COLLEGE AUDITORIUM East 69TH (Between Park & Lexington) services at 10:30AM • 5:45PM | ETHICAL CULTURE West 64TH and CPW service at 9:15AM | FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH Corner of West 79TH and Broadway service at 7:00PM |
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SUNDAY SERVICE MINISTRIES NEWS: VOLUNTEER APPRECIATION DAY!

BY PHOEBE KMECK

Volunteer Appreciation Day is a time to acknowledge and thank the Sunday Service Ministry Volunteers—including the Ushers, Welcome Center, Information Center, Book Table Ministry, and Communion servers—for how they work each week behind the scenes to ensure that we're able to worship. In honor of their selfless contributions, each Volunteer was listed by name in the special bulletin insert along with some of their written serving testimonies. Moving oral testimonies about how serving has affected their lives were delivered at each of the services by Volunteers Max Kmeck,



Patricia Pantoja, and Tom and Maria Bellini.

After each service, the congregation followed the jubilant sound of live Irish music coming from the Ministry Fair in the coffee hour. Last year, 65 people signed up at the Ministry Fair to volunteer for Redeemer—

and we were excited. This year, however, a whopping 119 new volunteers signed up and connected to Redeemer's community! And coming from someone who has the pleasure of personally knowing the Volunteers, they are a great community to connect to.

If you're interested in Volunteering once a month, we still have a great need for help on our East Side services. Please contact Mark Horton at mark@redeemer.com for further information. West Service volunteer inquiries may be sent to Phoebe Kmeck at phoebe@redeemer.com.

PRAYER CONFERENCE: THY KINGDOM COME... RENEWING THE CITY & OURSELVES THROUGH PRAYER

FRIDAY, JUNE 2 – 7:00PM TO 9:00PM
SATURDAY, JUNE 3 – 9:00AM TO 2:00PM

Tim Keller and special guest speaker, John Smed, will lead us in Kingdom prayer development. We will spend time praying in small groups.

All Redeemer attendees are encouraged to attend, as we pursue our vision for the city through Kingdom-focused prayer.

I can't think of anyone better prepared to lead us in the contextualizing of Kingdom-focused prayer in a city church like ours than John Smed. — Tim Keller



To register for the conference or for more information, please visit www.redeemer.com/prayer/rsvp

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REDEEMER TOWN HALL

BY MAX ANDERSON

On Saturday, April 29, Redeemer held a Town Hall to discuss the Vision Campaign and the future of the church. After a light breakfast, all the attendees found seats inside the sanctuary of First Baptist Church and the meeting began.

Redeemer's new Executive Director, Bruce Terrell was introduced and he set the stage for the day. Tim Keller followed with an outline with a few words on "the state of Redeemer's vision." Then leaders from each of the three areas of the vision campaign—church planting, new ministries, and the new building—gave reports about how the money will be spent in each of the areas.

Following the reports, the attendees were placed in groups

of 4 to discuss with each other what they had just heard about, to educate each other and to get involved in the conversation about Redeemer's vision. After



twenty minutes of small group discussion there was an hour of open mic question and answer with Tim and the other ministry leaders. Attendees asked questions and gave suggestions on a wide diversity of topics ranging from

family life, to the new building, to ideas for brand new ministries that could be funded by the campaign. The Town Hall was an attempt to recognize the value and encourage the continuation of congregation members sharing their ideas, hopes and dreams for Redeemer to become the church it should be in the city. If you missed the Town Hall, the session was taped and will be available at www.redeemer.com/townhall. Also available on the web site are copies of the handouts distributed at the meeting. Most importantly, if you have hopes and dreams for Redeemer, we hope you will continue to share them with us. Call the office. Or email us with your thoughts from the Town Hall site.