

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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<b>Series:</b>	<b>The Nicene Creed</b>		Pastor/Teacher
<b>Number:</b>	<b>18</b>		Gary L.W. Johnson
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### BY WHOM ALL THINGS WERE MADE

With over 46 million copies in print, Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* became a major factor in determining how people view Jesus and the Christian faith. Evangelical Christians in particular are worried about the influence on the faith from a single source they regard as a piece of well-written fiction that masquerades itself as historical fact. Years later, people still believe Brown's claims. The movie version of *The Da Vinci Code* was released in 2006 and became the second highest grossing film of the year. One of Brown's main characters is the scholarly (and villainous) gadfly Sir Leigh Teaking (played in the film version by noted British actor Ian McKellen), who confidently asserted that up until the convening of the Council of Nicea, "Jesus was viewed by his followers as a mortal prophet . . . a great and powerful man, but just a man nonetheless."<sup>1</sup> Teaking went on to declare that at the Council of Nicea, the doctrine of the deity of Christ was affirmed by a "relatively close vote." This astounding claim is pure fiction. The reality is that only *five* of the 318 bishops protested the language of the creed – and in the end only *two* refused to sign it.<sup>2</sup> What is particularly annoying is that Brown claims that even though his book is a work of fiction, it is in fact based upon meticulous historical research and that "all descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents and secret rituals in this novel are accurate."<sup>3</sup> Brown's opening page begins with the word "FACT" and asserts that all descriptions of documents "are accurate." "It is a book about big ideas, you can love them or you can hate them," Brown said in a speech. "But we're all talking about them, and that's really the point." Brown told National Public Radio's *Weekend Edition* during a 2003 publicity tour (he declines interviews now) that his characters and action are fictional but "the ancient history, the secret documents, the rituals, all of this is factual." Around the same time, on CNN he said, "the background is all true." *The Da Vinci Code* actually commits a large number of historical fallacies, and out and out fabrications, such as: Jesus was married and had children, the so-called secret gnostic gospels are more reliable than the ones we have in the Bible. The theories about the Sion Priory, the Knights Templar, Opus Dei and the outlandish claim that the Holy Grail somehow points to a trail of royal descendants of Jesus. Darrell Bock summed the book up by saying, "*The Da Vinci Code* is not a mere work of fiction dressed in the clothes of quasi nonfiction. It reflects an effort to represent and, in some cases, rewrite history with a selective use of ancient evidence that it ironically claims was the failing of the old story. It reflects an effort to redefine one of the key cultural forces standing at the base of Western civilization, the Christian faith. It claims to expose as fact something that is not there. Though there are a few points to be made and appreciated from such study, most of what lies at the base of this megacode lacks substantive historical support."<sup>4</sup> Many have read Brown's book and actually think his claims are accurate, causing noted New Testament scholar Ben Withering III to ponder: "What is it about our culture that makes us prone to listen to sensational claims about Jesus and his earliest followers, even when there is little or no hard evidence to support such conjectures? Why are we especially prone to this when it comes to the origins of Christianity? Why would a poorly researched but readable thriller like *The Da Vinci Code*, which claims to reveal startling new truths about Jesus and his life, create such a sensation in our culture?"<sup>5</sup>

After Jesus calmed the stormy sea (in the Old Testament, the God of Israel is Lord of the roaring sea, cf. Ps. 33:7, 65:7, 77:16; Job 12:15) and rebuked His disciples for their fear and lack of faith, they were awestruck and said to one another, “What manner of man is this, that even the wind and sea obey Him?” (Mark 4:35-41). In response to this question, the writer to the Hebrews declares, “He is the radiance of His (God) glory and the exact representation of His nature, upholding all things by the word of His power” (Heb. 1:3). The Apostle Paul proclaims that “He is the image of God; He has primacy over all created things” (Col. 1:15). The Jehovah’s Witnesses in their *New World Translation* (NWT) renders the passage this way: “He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; because by means of him all (other) things were created in the heavens and upon the earth, the things visible and the things invisible, no matter whether they are thrones or lordships or governments or authorities. All (other) things have been created through him and for him. Also, he is before all (other) things and by means of him all (other) things were made to exist.” You will note the four occurrences of the word *other* (in brackets). In the foreword of the NWT, the editors state, “enclosed words inserted to complete or clarify the sense in the English text.” By inserting the word *other*, however, the translators have not merely “completed” or “clarified” the English translation, they have altered the meaning of the original. Why? A look at the Jehovah’s Witnesses doctrines of the Bible and of God and Jesus soon reveals the answer. Jehovah’s Witnesses would concur with much of the kind of stuff that *The Da Vinci Code* and others of this stripe have written about the Council of Nicea. Jehovah’s Witnesses deny the doctrine of the Trinity and the coequality of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, holding instead a modern form of the ancient heresy of *Arianism*.<sup>6</sup> Christ, they believe, was created by God as a spirit-creature named Michael. Then through Christ, God made all other created things. Therefore, if Scripture is to fit preconceived doctrine, Col. 1:15-20 needs *clarification*, to wit, *amending*. Otherwise the Bible is here declaring that Christ is *before all things* and in fact was involved in the creation of all things. It would, in short, make him, as historic Christian orthodoxy teaches, coeternal with God.

**HISTORICAL SITUATION AT COLOSSAE:** We owe this great passage of Pauline Christology to the heresy of Gnostic Judaism, which had made inroads in the Church at Colossae.<sup>6</sup> This heresy taught the existence of angelic intermediaries (as listed in Colossians 1:16) between the Creator and the material universe. Jesus was considered to be only one of these angelic intermediaries. It is against this background that Paul writes.

**NOTE:** This passage (Colossians 1:15-20) is a “hymn,” but it does *not* carry the same meaning as a congregational song. Rather, it is a term that is really “creedal,” having dogmatic, confessional, liturgical and doxological import. The reason it is called “hymnic” is due to its stylistic (rhythm, parallelism, meter or chiasm) and linguistic (very selective vocabulary) structure. O’Brien points out: “The weight of NT scholarly opinion today considers that Colossians 1:15-20 is a pre-Pauline *hymn* inserted into the letter’s train of thought by the author. The preceding verses (12-14) are said to preserve the style of a confession (see above 19, 20) with its first person plurals (*we* and *us*), while the hymn itself makes no reference to the confessing community (all personal references are absent). Instead it asserts in exalted language the supremacy of Christ in creation and redemption. The immediately following words (vv. 21-23) use the language of direct speech to apply themes from the hymn, especially that of reconciliation, to the Colossian community. In describing the passage in this way it should be noted that the term *hymn* is not employed in the modern sense of what we understand by congregational hymns with metrical verses. Nor are we to think in terms of Greek poetic form. The category is used broadly, similar to that of *creed*, and includes dogmatic, confessional, liturgical, polemical or doxological material.”<sup>7</sup>

## I. **THE SOVEREIGN LORD OF CREATION.**

- A. ***The Essential Basis of Christ’s Lordship (v. 15a).*** The first thing Paul declares is that Christ is “the image of the invisible God.” What does this mean? Besides the very obvious notion of

“likeness,” the Greek word *eikon* (also used in 2 Cor. 4:4, 3:18; Rom. 8:29; and Col. 3:10) involves two other ideas:

1. **Representation** (compare with the word *charaktēr* in Hebrews 1:3). It indicates not mere resemblance (like one egg to another) but implies an archetype of which it is a copy. It is derived from its prototype. The context unfolds how the word is to be understood.
2. **Manifestation**. The Word as preincarnate or incarnate is the revelation of the unseen Father. Christ is the manifestation of the invisible God (Ex. 3:20; 1 Tim. 6:16 compare with John 1:18).

**NOTE:** If Jesus Christ is God, how can He be the image of God? The reference to God is God the Father. The Person of the Son bears the likeness of the Person of the Father (John 14:8, 9).

B. **The Economic Basis of Christ's Lordship (v. 15b)**. Christ Jesus is “the firstborn of every creature” (lit. “over all creation” as in the NIV). The Jehovah's Witnesses argue that this means that Christ is the first creature. The word *prōtotokos* does *not* mean “first created.” The Greek word for that idea is *prōtoktistos* (which is *never* used of Christ). *Prōtotokos* means “first-begotten” and is similar to “only begotten” (KJV), “only” (NIV), trans. from the Greek word *monogenēs* of John 1:18. Lee Iron points out, “that the Johannine *monogenēs* cannot be reduced to *only of his kind* but must have a metaphorical biological meaning, *only begotten*. John views Christ as the only begotten Son of God in the sense that he is the Father's only proper offspring deriving his divine being from the Father.”<sup>9</sup> Whereas “image” emphasizes Christ's relation to God, the second title, “firstborn of all creation,” designates His sovereignty over creation. “Paul is effectively refuting any claim (like that of the Jehovah's Witnesses) that Christ is an angelic creature emanating from God. Christ is God, and He is Lord of all creation.”<sup>10</sup> The insertion of the word *only* is not warranted by the Greek text. Metzger again responds, “It is not present in the original Greek and was obviously inserted to make the passage refer to Jesus as being on a par with other created things.” Metzger goes on to point out that Paul originally wrote Colossians in part to combat a notion of Christ similar to that held by the Jehovah's Witnesses in that some of the Colossians advocated the Gnostic notion that Jesus was the first of many other created intermediaries between God and men. The Jehovah's Witnesses have deliberately altered Col. 1:15-20 because, as the text naturally reads, it explicitly contradicts their doctrine that Christ is a creature. Metzger notes six other passages which the NWT also twist to form a more congenial to Witness doctrine: John 1:1; Phil. 2:6; Titus 2:13; 2 Peter 1:1; Rev. 3:14; and Pro. 8:22. Wallace makes clear that the grammar of the text in Colossians does not imply that Christ was *part* of creation, i.e., a created being. “But Paul makes it clear throughout this epistle that Jesus Christ is the supreme Creator, God in the flesh – e.g., cf. 1:15a, 2:9. In the section in which this verse is found, 1:9-20, he could hardly be more emphatic about the deity of his Lord.”<sup>10</sup> Ralph Martin helpfully details exactly what was at stake in errors that the Colossians were exposed to: “Paul quickly discerned that such a wrong-headed theology *meant a derogatory attitude to Jesus Christ*. If his teaching on the person and place of Jesus Christ has any meaning at all, it is emphatic on the point that He is unique and without peer. Both His relationship to God the Father and His value as revealer and redeemer are stamped with a finality and completeness which cannot be compromised. To Paul any suggestion that Christ was one mediator in a series of intermediaries between heaven and earth would be effectively to rob Him of His dignity and to paralyse Christian salvation at a vital nerve-centre. Nor could he tolerate any thought that Jesus Christ had only partially revealed God or *imperfectly* secured the church's redemption. This would open the door to the need for various supplemental contributions to human reconciliation, and so introduce the element of uncertainty into the Christian's fellowship with God. If Christ's reconciling work were incomplete, what assurance has he that he has placated the right angel-spirit or sufficiently understood the apparatus

needed to gain a full salvation – on the errorists’ principle that Christ’s achievement is not sufficient by itself?”<sup>11</sup>

C. ***The Explicit Proof of Christ’s Lordship (vv. 16, 17).*** Two great things are described as the foundation of Christ’s Lordship over creation.

1. CHRIST IS THE CREATOR. This central activity of Christ in creation is also stated in John 1:3 and Heb. 1:2 and is a complete denial of any Gnostic philosophy. The word trans. “were created,” *ektisthē*, is aorist and describes the definite historical act of creation.
2. CHRIST IS THE SUSTAINER OF THE UNIVERSE, “All things hold together in Him.” Apart from Christ’s continuous sustaining activity (Note the word trans. “hold together,” *sunestēken*, perfect tense), all things would literally come unglued!

**CONCLUSION:** Phillip Cary carefully notes that the Greek vocabulary in the Nicene Creed is entirely the same as in John 1:3 which describes the creation of the world through the Word which was in the beginning: *All things came to be through him, and without him not one thing came to be.* Cary then writes, “Once again, as in the first article, we are confronted with the contrast between *all things* and the Creator of all things. But here the verb (*egeneto*) is a very broad term for what comes to be or happens or becomes something. Often in older translations the verb is rendered *was made*, mainly due to the influence of Latin, where the way to say that something came to be is to say it was made to be so (*factus est*). But it is useful to stick with the more precise rendering, *came to be*, so as to be clear about the difference between this and the verb *to make* (*poiein* in Greek). John’s use of this verb underlines that all things owe their coming into being to the Word of God. It gives us a different model of creation than the picture of an artist making things by the skill of his hands. It is more like *he commanded and they were created* (Psalm 148:5) and *God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light* (Genesis 1:3).”<sup>12</sup>

Since Christ not only created all things but sustains creation, can you not *trust* Him? Every breath you draw, you do so because Christ gives it to you (cf. Dan. 5:23). The One who is the Sovereign Creator is also the One who became a man and gave Himself up as an atonement for sinners. He now is enthroned at His Father’s right hand. Confess Him as your Lord and Savior. The day will come when every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:10, 11).

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> As cited by J. E. Komoszewski, M. J. Sawyer, D. B. Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus: What The Da Vinci Code and other Novel Speculations Don’t Tell you* (Kregel, 2006), p. 169.

<sup>2</sup> E. W. Lutzer, *The Da Vinci Deception* (Tyndale, 2004), p. 17. R. P. C. Hanson, in his definitive study, remarks, “According to Athanasius, Nicea was constructed as a deliberately anti-Arian document. Indeed, we do not need Athanasius to tell us so. Its consciously anti-Arian tone is unmistakable. All the obnoxious doctrines of Arius and his followers are struck at in Nicea in the most impressive way.” *The Search for The Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318-381* (Baker Academic, 2008), p. 164.

<sup>3</sup> As cited by D. L. Bock, *Breaking The Da Vinci Code* (Nelson, 2004), p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p. 149.

<sup>5</sup> B. Witherington, *What Have They Done With Jesus? Beyond Strange Theories and Bad History – Why We Can Trust the Bible* (Harper, 2006), p. 2. There has been an amazing amount of scholarly response, primarily by Evangelicals criticizing the story and calling into question Brown’s claims that the book is “historically” accurate. The conservative Roman Catholic group Opus Dei, portrayed as villainous in the story, is among those asking Sony Corp. to issue a disclaimer with the firm. Assaults on “Da Vinci” don’t just come from evangelicals like Witherington, Beck and Lutzer, but from Roman Catholic leaders such as Chicago’s Cardinal Francis George, who says Brown is waging “an attack on the Catholic Church” through preposterous historical claims. Among more liberal thinkers, Harold Attridge, dean of Yale’s Divinity School, says Brown has “wildly misinterpreted” early Christianity. Bart Ehrman, who teaches religion at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, likens the phenomenon to the excitement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when deluded masses thought Jesus would return in 1844 (which gave birth to the Seventh-day Adventists). Ehrman, whose own book, (*Misquoting Jesus*), proposed a radical approach to the text of the New Testament,

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nonetheless sees Brown's book in a decidedly negative light. The novel's impact on religious ideas in popular culture, he says, is "quite unlike anything we've experienced in our lifetimes." Ehrman details Brown's numerous mistakes in truth and fiction in *The Da Vinci Code* and asks: "Why didn't he simply get his facts straight?" For the record, Da Vinci had no "code;" art historians are as frustrated with Dan Brown's misstatements as are Catholic and evangelical theologians. Cf. J. Garlow and P. Jones, *Cracking Da Vinci's Code* (Victor Books, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Given the importance of this, I am going to provide the following lengthy analysis. "The exact identity of Paul's opponents at Colossae is a matter of debate. The language Paul uses strongly suggests that they were Jewish mystical ascetics who, like the later Gnostics affirmed a *special* knowledge of God's mysteries that came to a person apart from any divine mediator, thus no need for Christ. Cf. A. J. Bandstra, "Did the Colossian Errorists Need a Mediator?" in *New Dimensions in New Testament Study*, eds. R. Longenecker and M. Tenney (Zondervan, 1974), p. 329-343. I need to comment on Gnosticism in the NT because the claim made by Dan Brown in *The Da Vinci Code* that the Gnostic gospels predate the four Gospels of the NT. New Testament scholar S. C. Schindlerman, in a recent paper on the subject points out that "for the Gnostic gospels to truly represent the earliest form of Christianity, we would have to establish at least two points. First, the Gnostic gospels and the theological perspective found in them would need to predate the canonical gospels and their theological perspective. Second, the theological perspective found in the canonical gospels would need to emerge out of the theological perspective found in the Gnostic gospels and alter the Gnostic theological perspective in some way.

In fact, the evidence points in the other direction. The evidence leads us to conclude that the canonical gospels represent the earliest form of Christianity. Gnostic Christianity came later and emerged as a deviant form out of orthodox Christianity.

The work of biblical scholar Edwin Yamauchi focused specifically on these issues, and what he discovered directly contradicts the idea that orthodox Christianity emerged out of Gnostic Christianity as its deviant form. Yamauchi established the developmental timeline of Gnosticism in relationship to early Christianity and identified three stages that culminated in the development of full-blown Christian Gnosticism. The first and earliest stage can be characterized by the terms *gnostic* or *gnosis*. The term *gnosis* can be used to describe much of Greek philosophical thought after the time of Plato in which physical things like the body were thought to be evil and spiritual things were thought to be good. This body-spirit dualism became characteristic of much of Greek philosophical thought after Plato. At this stage, *gnosis* was more of a general, dualistic way of viewing life than it was a well-developed theological system.

A second stage of development, which Yamauchi refers to as *incipient Gnosticism*, occurred shortly after the emergence of Christianity in the first century AD. As the Christian gospel spread throughout a Greek-speaking world that was dominated by dualistic thinking, some *converts* began to syncretize the teachings of Christianity with their body-spirit dualistic thinking. It was this syncretization that the apostle Paul was most likely attacking in 1 and 2 Corinthians. Again, this second stage does not represent a sophisticated theological system. Rather it actually shows the earliest stages of Gnostic thinking attaching itself as a parasite onto orthodox Christianity.

The third stage brought about the development of the Gnostic gospels and a full-blown Christian Gnosticism in the third century. By this point, the syncretism had developed more fully. Not only had Gnostic Christianity syncretized Greek body-spirit dualism with orthodox Christianity, but it had developed an entire intricate theological system around that basic belief. This Gnostic Christianity taught that Jesus was a mediator figure between humans and Yahweh, but it also had numerous other mediatorial figures known as aeons that stood between Yahweh and an ultimate transcendent divine being. The need for these numerous mediator figures was based on the idea that the divine could never expose himself to this dirty, evil world. Therefore, his contact with this world had to be mediated by several mediating figures so as to avoid contamination.

Yamauchi's methodology for establishing this chronology was based on a close examination of all the Gnostic Christian texts available to him. He established that the earliest Gnostic Christian texts date back only to the third century AD, whereas the manuscript evidence for the New Testament books dates back much earlier than that. If one were to argue that orthodox Christianity emerged out of Gnostic Christianity, one would have to point to evidence that the Gnostic Christian texts were written before the orthodox Christian texts – or at least that there is evidence for Gnostic Christian texts written close to the same time as the orthodox Christian texts.

The fact is that there is no evidence for Gnostic Christian texts that predate the third century AD. Since none exists, orthodox Christianity couldn't have emerged out of Gnostic Christianity. This fact, coupled with the reality that some of the key theological concepts found in the Gnostic Christian texts cannot be found in any of the earlier New Testament texts, has established the view that Gnostic Christianity sprang out of orthodox Christianity and not the other way around." (See his full article at [www.geneva.edu/magazine](http://www.geneva.edu/magazine).)

<sup>7</sup> P. T. O'Brien, *Colossians: Word Biblical Commentary* (Word, 1982), p. 30. Dan Wallace points out, "One of the arguments for Christ's deity being affirmed here is that this is a *hymn* (15-20). Hymns were sung to deities, not mere mortals. *Greek Grammar: Beyond the Basics* (Zondervan, 1996), p. 128.

<sup>8</sup> C. L. Irons, "A Lexical Defense of The Johannine Only-Begotten" in *Retrieving Eternal Generation*, eds. F. Sanders & S. R. Swain (Zondervan, 2017), p. 115.

<sup>9</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, "The Jehovah's Witnesses and Jesus Christ," *Theology Today* (Apr. 1953, Vol. X, No. 1).

<sup>10</sup> Wallace, op. cit., p. 128.

<sup>11</sup> R. P. Martin, *Colossians: The Church's Lord and The Christian's Liberty* (Zondervan, 1972), p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Phillip Cary, *The Nicene Creed: An Introduction* (Lexham, 2023), p. 87.