

THIS WE KNOW
Sermon by William W. Williamson, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church
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I John 5:9-21

Throughout its two thousand year history, the Christian gospel has been regularly assaulted by those who claim to have found some additional information about Jesus. These folks say that they have uncovered some new sources that prove this or that about Jesus, and which therefore cast the whole message of the Christian gospel into doubt.

Two large boulders have been tossed in to disturb the waters of the gospel lately. One of those boulders is the release of the ancient writing called the Gospel of Judas. The other is the novel, now a movie, called *The Da Vinci Code*. Both of them have made quite a splash. And the ripples have upset many in the Christian church. Some say that these books are heretical, and strike at the very foundations of the faith. Others say that these books prove that Christianity is one big cover-up of the truth. Whom shall we believe?

First, a word about each book. The Gospel of Judas is an actual writing from antiquity, probably from about a century or so after Christ lived on earth. The manuscript has been known for some time, having been discovered in 1978. It has been in the hands of scholars since then, and has only recently been released to the general public.

The Gospel of Judas is from a Gnostic sect called the Cainites. It begins with the words: "The secret account of the revelation that Jesus spoke in conversation with Judas Iscariot during a week three days before he celebrated Passover."¹ That's a typical introduction to a Gnostic text. The Gnostics believed in special knowledge only made available to a few. You had to be part of the secret group to get this special knowledge. So the Gospel of Judas is "a secret account."

¹ Luke Timothy Johnson, "The Lost Judas." *The Christian Century*, May 16, 2006, p. 34.

This lost gospel purports to tell how Judas was really the only disciple who knew what was going on, and actually assisted Jesus as he came to the time of his death. It is a deliberate distortion of the traditional Christian message, written in an obvious attempt “to embarrass the larger Christian tradition,” and with “an overt hostility to the leaders of the church.”²

There is really nothing new in the Gospel of Judas. The early church writer Irenaeus had denounced it as early as the year 180. From it we don’t learn anything new about the Judas of history, or about Jesus of Nazareth. The Gospel of Judas is a curiosity. But it is hardly a threat to the Christian faith.

The larger noise has been made by the other book, *The Da Vinci Code*, now a movie with no less than Tom Hanks in the lead role. The book by Daniel Brown begins with a statement under the bold headline: “**FACT:** All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate.”³ But putting such a statement at the front of a book doesn’t make it so. (It would be similar to my standing before you and saying: “I’ve got the best head of hair of anybody here.” I can say it, but it’s still not true.)

So, for example, *The Da Vinci Code* claims that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married and had children together. Actually, there is no evidence whatsoever in any gospel of such a relationship.

The Da Vinci Code says that the early church knew that Jesus was just a man, and it was only at the raucous Council of Nicea in 325 that Jesus was upgraded to a divine status. (One writer says that in the movie, the Council of Nicea resembles nothing so much as a Beastie Boys’ concert.⁴) Actually, Jesus’ divinity was known from the first. The issue at Nicea was the nature of that divinity.

The Da Vinci Code claims that the disciple nearest to Jesus in Leonardo’s famous painting of the last supper is a woman, and that Leonardo himself was in on the hidden church secrets. Actually, it was the fashion of the time for men to be portrayed in art with long hair.

² Johnson, p. 35.

³ James A. Brashler, “*The Da Vinci Code*: Fact or fiction?” *The Presbyterian Outlook*, May 22/29, 2006, p. 7.

⁴ Anthony Lane, “Heaven Can Wait.” *The New Yorker*, May 29, 2006, p. 76.

The Da Vinci Code should be treated for what it is: a fictional detective story, not a factual account.

Still, the interest in books like *The Gospel of Judas* and *The Da Vinci Code* indicate a strain of thought that runs through our culture. The thought is something like this: The church is in the business of hiding things. The gospel is just a trumped up story. Or, as one of the characters in the book puts it, Christianity is “the biggest cover up in human history.”

People can believe as they wish. And some would probably prefer, despite all the evidence to the contrary, that the church is in the business of hiding the truth. Those who are determined to believe that probably cannot be persuaded otherwise.

But at its best, the church of Jesus Christ is just the opposite of the way it has been portrayed in these works. The church is not about secret societies, or hidden knowledge, or privileged insights known only to a few. The church is about the truth, and making that truth open to all who will hear and respond.

Today we are concluding a series of sermons on the First Letter of John. It is a letter that was probably written to a group of believers whose faith had been challenged by opponents, not unlike the challenges to Christian faith today. “Your gospel isn’t true,” these opponents claimed. “Jesus was just a man. . . . The faith doesn’t make any difference in the way you live.”

First John is a passionate attempt to encourage the faith of those who have been assaulted by these opponents. In its pages it affirms the Lordship of Christ, and the centrality of love. It wants us to know Jesus Christ “who is true.” (5:20)

And so here at the end of the book, as a way to say it one more time, the writer affirms what is known, not secret knowledge available only to a select few, but knowledge that is open to everyone: “We know that those who are born of God do not sin, but the one who was born of God protects them. . . . We know that we are God’s children. . . . We know that the Son of God has come and . . . we are in him.”

This we know . . . this we know. Don’t get so distracted by the arguments of your opponents, says First John, that you lose sight of these simple truths by which we live. We can say the same thing today. Read the *Gospel of Judas* if you want to, or *The Da Vinci Code*, but don’t let it take the place of the simple, profound gospel that sustains us:

--we are kept safe in God;
 --in a world of evil, we are a part of the family of God;
 --we belong to Jesus Christ, and that gives us eternal life.
 It is those simple truths by which we live in Christ.

At its best, the church is open and transparent—no secrets. Probably the reason books like *The Da Vinci Code* find such an audience is that at times the church has in fact tried to make things hidden and obscure. It's true, not just in the Roman Catholic church, but even in Presbyterian circles. I know of a Presbyterian church with a membership of several thousand members, where the salaries of the ministers is grouped in a single line item called "Personnel." Congregations are supposed to know what their ministers make, but this church covers it up.

There have, no doubt, been times when you have said around here: "I don't know what's going on. Somebody's covering something up." Whenever that sentiment is said or thought, we have sinned and have stopped being the church. At its best, the church never obscures or covers up or hides. We proclaim a gospel that at every point is open and points to the truth.

That's what First John would have us know. The writer seeks to reassure people who have had their faith shaken by attacks from others. This letter is a little like the letter parents write to their children who are away at camp. The child may be a little scared, or homesick. So the parents write the reassuring things: "The cat is fine; your bed will be ready for you; we love you."⁵ Nothing new. First John does the same: "We know we are safe in God. We are part of God's family. We have eternal life in Jesus." It is simple reassurance about the timeless verities, the eternal truths by which we live.

So pick up a copy of the Gospel of Judas if you'd like—it's probably available on Amazon. Read *The Da Vinci Code*; it's not the best mystery story but it's OK. Just don't get so distracted by all the obscurities that you mistake them for the truth. If it's too complicated, too obscure, too hidden, it's not gospel.

Instead, hold fast to what we know. We know we belong to God. We know we are given life in Christ. We know we are called to love, just as he loved us.

That's what we know. And that's enough. ✠

⁵ Thanks to Steve Thomas for this image.

