IS JESUS THE ONLY WAY?

In its early years, the Christian church and its core beliefs bore little resemblance to the church we have come to know today. With dozens of competing gospels and narratives of the life of Jesus, the church was at a crossroads, its future dependent upon which version of Jesus prevailed.

Our New Testament of 27 books was in place by 360 A.D. But in the two hundred years before that, there was constant debate about inclusion, especially with respect to the canon, the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke (the "synoptic gospels") told similar stories and were obvious candidates for inclusion. But it was the ultimate selection of John with his unique messages that Jesus was God's actual divine presence on earth and that only those who believed in him would find salvation which provided the framework for Christian unity through the centuries.

John was hardly a foregone conclusion. As scholarship over the last 70 years has revealed, the gnostic Gospel of Thomas was a serious alternative possibility. And its depiction of Jesus and his divinity was radically different than that of John. Thomas described Jesus as present in all of us, an almost mystical interpretation, and did not demand belief in a discrete Christ as a condition of salvation.

We will compare these two gospels as described in Biblical scholar Elaine Pagels' *Beyond Belief*. This inquiry will consider how the history of the church may have differed if Thomas had been included instead of John. In John 14:6, Jesus said "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."   This has been a foundation of Christian theology for centuries but it has also raised the question of whether there are indeed ways to approach God other than belief in Jesus as his divine manifestation on Earth. Thomas thought so. The consequences of these two different approaches resonate with us today.

Readings
Chapter 2 of Beyond Belief
Gospel of Thomas (included for information)