

A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO THE DA VINCI CODE

A Christaf seminar presented by Dr Nola Passmore, 17 May 2006

WHAT IS THE DA VINCI CODE?

The Da Vinci Code is a bestselling novel by Dan Brown. Since its publication in 2003, it has sold over 43 million copies worldwide, making Dan Brown a multi-millionaire. His annual income in 2005 was estimated at \$US76.5 million. About 1.5 million copies of the book have been sold in Australia, with approximately 1 in 13 Australians having read the book (McLean, 2006). In reality, this figure is likely to be higher when you also consider how many people may have borrowed the book from the library or a friend without actually owning a copy. The movie is due for release on 18 May, and is guaranteed to be a blockbuster.

WHY IS IT SO POPULAR?

As a piece of fiction, it is a rollicking tale of murder, mystery, intrigue, riddles, secrets, and conspiracy theories. In short, it's a real page-turner.

WHY SHOULD CHRISTIANS BE CONCERNED ABOUT THE BOOK?

The main premise of the book is that Jesus was not the Son of God. Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married and they had a child who was smuggled to France. That bloodline still continues today and has been protected by a secret society called the Priory of Sion. The church has tried to keep this fact a secret, with the Catholic group Opus Dei willing to go to any lengths in the book to suppress the "truth". Tied in with this main theme is the "fact" that Mary Magdalene is actually the Holy Grail and that she was the head apostle. The so-called Gnostic gospels were omitted from the Canon of Scripture, not because of their dubious origins and Gnostic teaching, but as a power play by church officials who voted on whether or not Jesus was God and chose to simply omit "scriptures" that raised Mary Magdalene to her proper place in church history. In one of the sub-plots, the book also describes an obscene sex rite performed by a member of a sect, who happens to be the grandfather of the book's heroine Sophie. By the time the book's hero Robert Langdon has finished explaining the meaning of this act to Sophie, it seems like a perfectly normal activity with spiritual significance. Indeed the book promotes pagan practices and goddess worship.

BUT IF IT'S JUST A NOVEL, WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL?

Although the book is fiction, it blurs the line between fact and fiction. At the front of the book, Dan Brown states that "all descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate". In interviews, Dan Brown has reaffirmed his belief in the "facts" of his novel (Bock, 2004; Olson & Miesel, 2004).

Olson and Miesel (2004, pp. 33-37) note five main problems with the book:

1. It claims to be historically accurate and based on fact, but often it is not.
2. It repeatedly misunderstands or misrepresents people, places, and events.
3. It promotes a radical feminist, neo-gnostic agenda.
4. It incorrectly and unfairly misrepresents Christianity and traditional Christian beliefs about God, Jesus, and the Bible.
5. It propagates a relativistic, indifferent attitude toward truth and religion.

Due to the blurring of fact and fiction, many people believe the conspiracy theories presented in the novel, and there have been many reports of people being confused about the basis of their faith or even losing their faith after reading the novel (Olson & Miesel, 2004; Josh McDowell, 2006).

The questions and alternate theories presented in the book are important because they address the foundations of our faith. If the church has lied to us about Jesus' marriage to Mary Magdalene and has been involved in a huge cover-up to keep secret the fact that Jesus' bloodline has survived, how do we know the church hasn't lied to us about other things? Maybe Jesus isn't the Son of God, maybe He didn't die on the cross for our sins and rise to life three days later, maybe God doesn't even exist. If that's the case, we have no hope of eternal life, we don't know where we came from and where we're going, we don't have a purpose in life.

The ideas presented in the book are nothing new, as false teachers have always been around. For example, the apostle Peter warned the believers that false teachers would "secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord" and that many would follow them and bring the truth into disrepute (2 Pet 2:1-3). The apostle Paul also warned that many would be swayed by false doctrines:

For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths (2 Tim 4:3-4).

Indeed, this was already happening in the Galatian church. Paul was astonished that they were so quickly deserting the true faith and being swayed by a different gospel (Gal 1:6-9; see also 2 Cor 11:4, 13-15).

However, the truth is that the Christian faith is built on a strong foundation. We don't need to be afraid of the claims in Dan Brown's book because they don't hold up to scrutiny.

HOW SHOULD A CHRISTIAN RESPOND?

Some churches are telling their congregations not to read the book or see the movie. However, that advice could actually fuel the conspiracy theories. What is the church hiding from us? I personally think that whether a Christian chooses to read the book and/or see the movie is a matter of conscience. We shouldn't encourage people to do something with which they don't feel comfortable. We are also warned in scripture not to let the exercise of our freedom become a stumbling block to the weak (1 Cor 8:9). However, we are also told that we should contend for the faith (Jude v3), guard the sound teaching we have been given (2 Tim 1:13-14), "demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God" (2 Cor 10:5), be prepared in season and out of season to correct, rebuke, and encourage (2 Tim 4:2); and be prepared to answer people's questions about the faith. As Peter reminds us:

... in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander (1 Peter 3:15-16).

Note the two key points here: (a) Be prepared to give an answer, but (b) do this with gentleness and respect. In other words, speak the truth in love (Eph 4:15). The Da Vinci Code does make some outrageous claims about Christianity and the church, but we need to keep in mind that some who have been swayed by the book may have been hurt by Christians or the church in the past, while others may genuinely be wondering about spiritual issues and questioning the meaning of life.

This is a great opportunity to engage with the popular culture, and talk to people about the truth of the gospel. As Paul says in Ephesians 5:15-16, "Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil". Christians have not always made the most of such opportunities. For example, Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* was an incredibly successful movie, making US\$160 million worldwide. However, it stirred up controversy among the Jewish community, with some claiming the movie was anti-Semitic (Detweiler, 2005). As Detweiler (p. 27) notes:

The Passion was a brilliant movie, but for the Christian community, it was a missed opportunity. As followers of Christ, we should have used the controversy as a chance to better understand the Hollywood community and to build bridges with them. Instead, we used it as another tool in the culture war.

Let's not miss this opportunity. Detweiler (2005, p. 40) argues that "if the church adopts a quiet, humble attitude of confession and contrition, then perhaps a resurrection is possible—even in Hollywood".

EXAMINING SOME OF THE CLAIMS IN THE DA VINCI CODE

The following is a very brief overview of some of the main points. For more detail, please see the references at the end of this handout.

As a starting point, let's return to Dan Brown's statement that "all descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate". Even if the documents in the book have been accurately described, and I'm not sure they have been, this does not mean that the contents of the documents are true. For example, someone could write me a letter claiming that the Prime Minister likes to dress up like a pixie and do a little dance in his garden every night. I could accurately report the contents of that document to the press, but it doesn't mean that the claims made in the document were actually true in the first place.

Also the "facts" about art and architecture reported in the book are not all true. For example, the book claims that Leonardo Da Vinci was a member of the Priory of Sion and knew the truth about Mary Magdalene. Da Vinci subsequently planted codes in his paintings to signal this truth. For example, the figure on Jesus' right in the famous painting of the Last Supper had traditionally been assumed to be the apostle John. However, the characters in Brown's book claim that the reason the person on Jesus' right looks somewhat effeminate is that it is not John at all, but none other than Mary Magdalene. This ignores the facts that the figure in the painting has been understood to be John since Leonardo's time and that Da Vinci often painted effeminate looking males in his paintings, as did many other Renaissance artists (Baldwin, 2004).

The May 2006 edition of Reader's Digest also debunks some of the locations used in the book. For example, the Saint-Sulphice church in Paris is the scene of one of the murders in the book, where the crazed monk Silas takes a candelabra from the altar and strikes Sister Sandrine Biell. In reality, the candelabra is so heavy that it would take three men to lift it. The letters "PS" on some of the stained-glass windows are supposed to signify the Priory of Sion, but they actually mean St Peter. Indeed, French journalists Marie-France Etchegoin and Frederic Lenoir have managed to trace the "ancient" Priory of Sion to 1956! (Calmeyn, 2006). The obelisk in the church "is not of Egyptian pagan origin. It is in fact a gnomon, a scientific instrument installed by astronomers in 1743 to perfect calculations of the earth's rotation and the date of the spring equinox" (Calmeyn, 2006, p. 111). Calmeyn also notes that there is a sign on the wall of the church that states: "Contrary to the allegations of a recent blockbuster novel, Saint-Sulphice is not a former pagan temple dedicated to the goddess Isis. No such edifice ever existed on this site ..." (p. 111). Visitors to the Grand Gallery of the Louvre Museum are also disappointed to find that the descriptions in the book are not accurate. Perhaps errors such as this have led Dan Brown to tone down his original statement on his web site: "The 'Fact' page [in the novel] makes no statement whatsoever about any of the ancient theories discussed by the fictional characters. Interpreting those ideas is left to the reader" (Calmeyn, 2006,

p. 113). So let's turn to some of the book's theological claims. For a more complete treatment of these issues and other points not covered here, please see the references at the end of this handout.

Claim 1

There were more than 80 gospels considered for inclusion in the New Testament, but only four were chosen by the Roman emperor Constantine for political purposes.

Response

According to well-known apologist Josh McDowell, there were about 60 other documents considered, not all of which were labelled as gospels. The majority of these were Gnostic writings. According to Bock (2004), the Gnostics were “a ‘Christian’ sect of the second and third centuries that believed in dualism, namely, a distinction between the purity of the immaterial world and the corruptibility of the material world. They also believed that the God of creation was not the pure God, that there was a distinction between Jesus who suffered on the cross and the Christ who was the transcendent Savior. They held that the revelation they received gave them unique insight over any other writings. This revelation provided them with access to *gnosis*, or knowledge about God” (pp. 178-179). The four gospels we have in our Bibles today were not chosen for political reasons. They were the only ones that had been accepted for at least 200 years before the birth of Constantine (Edwards, 2006). Bock (2004) notes that by the end of the second century, the four gospels were widely regarded as the primary source of information about Jesus' life and ministry. They were either written by eyewitnesses who had been with Jesus or observed his ministry (i.e., Matthew, Mark, and John) or historians who knew the original apostles and were reporting events within 50 years or so of Jesus' death. The bulk of the Gnostic “gospels” were written a few generations after the foundations of the Christian faith. According to Gumbel (2005), the four gospels and the epistles of Paul were accepted as scripture by about 130AD and were “placed on the same footing as the Old Testament between 170 and 220 AD ... sixty-one of the sixty-six books of our Bible were already treated as sacred 100 years before Constantine was born” (pp. 22-23).

Claim 2

Jesus was not regarded as divine in the days of the early church. His divinity was decided by a very close vote at the Council of Nicea in the 4th century.

Response

There is ample evidence that Jesus was regarded as divine early in the history of the church. The four gospels attest to that. For example, when Jesus asked Peter who he thought he was, Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mt 16:16). The vote at Nicea wasn't a close one. Instead, the meeting of more than 200 church leaders in Nicea drafted the Nicene Creed which we still use today. It made a

statement of what the majority of churches already believed; namely, that Jesus was the Son of God. Only two of the bishops refused to sign the statement (Edwards, 2006).

Claim 3

Mary Magdalene and Jesus were married and had a child. That bloodline still continues today.

Response

Some of those who argue this case say that Jesus must have been married because it was customary for Jewish rabbis to be married. As Jesus was a teacher and therefore acted like a rabbi, he would have followed the cultural custom and married. As Bock (2004) notes, however, Jesus was not technically a rabbi and the Jewish leaders certainly didn't recognise him as such. Also, while it was customary for Jewish men to be married, it wasn't always the case. Some Jews chose to remain unmarried so that they could exhibit single-minded devotion to God.

With regard to Jesus being married to Mary Magdalene in particular, some note that Mary travelled with Jesus (e.g., Lk 8:1-3) and that Jesus seemed to have a special relationship with her (e.g., by appearing to her before appearing to the disciples after the resurrection). However, the gospels do not single out Mary as having a special relationship. She is mentioned alongside other women and her name is never linked to Jesus specifically (Bock, 2004).

Some also point to some of the Gnostic "gospels" to suggest that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married. For example, the so-called "Gospel of Philip", which was written about 200 years after the time of Jesus, indicates that Mary was a companion of Jesus and suggests that he loved her more than the other apostles and that he kissed her often. However, Bock cites the following piece of text from that writing: "'And the companion of the [...] Mary Magdalene [... loved] her more than [all] the disciples [and used to] kiss her [often] on her [...]' The brackets indicate broken locations in the manuscript where there is no reading because the manuscript is damaged" (Bock, 2004, p. 21). Even if we believe that the Gnostic writings are true, however, they never claim Jesus was married. Bock states the obvious that the writers of the Gnostic material never specifically stated that Jesus was married because they shared the common knowledge that this was not true. If Jesus and Mary Magdalene were not married, and there is no evidence to suggest that they had a marriage-like relationship, then the argument that they had a child also falls away. There is no evidence of such a child.

Claim 4

Mary Magdalene was the chief apostle and the church has suppressed this fact as a power play against women.

Response

One of the arguments used to support this claim is that Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene after the resurrection and asked her to go and tell the apostles that he had risen. In that sense, she was “an apostle to the apostles” (Bock, 2004). However, only John’s gospel mentions Mary alone at the resurrection (Jn 20:10-18). The other three gospels have her as one of a group of women who saw the risen Lord and received the instruction to go and tell the disciples what they had seen (Mt 28:1-10; Mk 16:1-8; Lk 24:1-10). They were apostles in the sense that they were commissioned to proclaim to others that Jesus was alive; however, this does not mean that Mary and the other women were ranked higher than the apostles (Bock, 2004).

Another argument comes from the so-called “Gospel of Mary” which has been attributed to Mary Magdalene. This “gospel” was written sometime in the second century (Gumbel, 2005). As noted by Edwards, much of the document has been lost or damaged and large sections are missing, as we saw earlier with the “kiss” passage. Therefore, it is difficult to assess what is actually being said. It is a Gnostic text, in that it claims Jesus had given Mary special revelation that he hadn’t given to the disciples. This contrasts with the gospels that were widely accepted by the early church.

So has the church led a conspiracy to cover up Mary Magdalene’s true role and to keep women in their place? Well, we could get into a big discussion here about the role of women in the church in general, but that is a wider discussion that is beyond the scope of this seminar. To address the claims made in the novel, let’s turn to the way in which women were regarded in the time of Jesus and the early church.

The gospels record many instances of Jesus’ high regard for women. A number of women were among his followers and Luke notes that some of them helped to support Jesus and the disciples from their own means (Lk 7:1-3). He broke with the conventions of the day by talking to the Samaritan woman at the well (Jn 4:1-42); forgiving the woman who anointed his feet with perfume, while Simon the Pharisee was disgusted at her actions (Lk 8:36-50); and showing compassion to the woman caught in adultery (Jn 8:1-11). As already noted, he also chose to appear first to the women after his resurrection. Bock (2004) notes that this is especially significant because women were not regarded as reliable witnesses in those days. If the early church had suppressed the true story, they would not have chosen women to tell the disciples about Jesus’ resurrection. “That Jesus selected women as the first witnesses to God’s great act is an affirmation of their value and merit before God” (Bock, 2004, p. 139). Some of the early churches also met in the homes of women (e.g., Acts 12:12, Col 4:15), Priscilla worked along with her husband in teaching Apollos the truth (Acts 18: 24-26), and Paul notes a number of women among his valued Christian workers (e.g., Rom 16: 6, 12). Women were certainly valued by Jesus and played a

valuable role in the early church, though there does not appear to be any concrete evidence to suggest that Mary's role was superior to that of the apostles.

CONCLUSIONS

I could have gone through many more claims and counter-arguments, but the ones I've mentioned are hopefully enough to give you some tools for talking to others who have read the book or seen the movie. The references at the end of this handout provide much more detail. The Da Vinci Code is an interesting novel, but it's just that – a novel. We need not be afraid of the claims in the book because they do not stand up against the historical and logical evidence supporting the gospel record. Many may have doubted the claims of Christianity or even turned from their faith as a result of reading the book. But we now have an opportunity to share with people the real gospel – and that is Good News!

REFERENCES

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WEB SITES

www.davinciquest.org – This is a great web site put together by Campus Crusade for Christ. It contains questions and answers, lots of articles, and a Josh McDowell study guide. Especially have a look at the apologetics link and the PDF version of the Da Vinci Code magazine.

www.thetruthaboutdavinci.com – A site put together by Westminster Theological Seminary to answer the questions raised by the book.