

A Christian Response to The Da Vinci Code

The Book

The book is everywhere. All kinds of folks talk about it, magazine articles are written about it, television series are coming out referencing it, and it's being made into a movie. Before I read the book, I was concerned that I didn't know enough about it. It seemed that so many people were taking it so seriously. After reading it, however, I was left wondering why anybody would do so and why any Christian would be at all concerned. At least, that was my initial reaction. Countless responses have already been written leaving the average Christian suffering from information overload. This response is brief and, I think, all that is necessary to confidently defend the issues raised in the book.

The Story

The book is interesting enough; I was held in rapt attention during the first half. My interest waned towards the end (which I thought was anticlimactic). The book reads like a detective novel with each (very short) chapter ending with a cliff-hanger. It's the story of a college professor (Robert Langdon), a police cryptologist (Sophie Neveu), and a British Historian (Sir Leigh Teabing). This trio attempts to solve the age long mystery and location of the true "Holy Grail" after being provided with clues by Neveu's grandfather who left these clues as he was dying from a mortal stab wound inflicted by a shady monk belonging to "Opus Dei"; a radical esoteric Catholic sect.

Langdon and Teabing (life long grail junkies) school Neveu about the true meaning of the grail and how Christianity (Catholicism mostly) has been one big conspiracy to cover up the truth. Typical of their observations is this one concerning the Bible: "History has never had a definitive version of the book".¹ The theme of the feminine goddess and the supposed fact that Christianity demonized the feminine is woven throughout their erudite sessions with Neveu.

The Motivation

While reading the book, I imagined that the author (Dan Brown) was making his character's fictional claims about Christianity purely for the purpose of ratcheting up the intrigue. I'm a Christian, and it worked on me; imagine what kind of tingling excitement it might arouse in unbelievers. Specifically, I can imagine that this book would appeal to feminists (primarily), atheists, and criminals. I mention the latter because in my experience in working in a jail, I noticed that crooks love conspiracy theories that undermine any established norms such as those that buttress the laws which caused their incarceration (the laws are at fault, you see).

I didn't suspect Mr. Brown of harboring nefarious motives for making up his character's assertions; after all, the book is a work of non-fiction, and his job is to entertain. Only after finishing the book did I read this tidbit quoted from the dustcover (and later noticed that I had scanned right over it's presence in the preface under the bold heading "Fact"): "All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret ritual in this novel are accurate." Whoa! That's a bold claim considering the content of the book! This may even point to an agenda...

Concerning "documents", that statement is at best misleading since actual quoted texts of the Gnostic gospels and Scripture may be accurate but everything else about them (why the Gnostic gospels were excluded from the Bible, for instance) is false. Even when it comes to artwork it's skirting the truth. For instance, one of the characters asserts that Mary Magdalene is in Leonardo Da Vinci's famous *Last Supper*. Author and historian Sharan Newman (whom I don't believe to be a Christian based on her writings) notes, "...there is no reason to assume that Leonardo's composition or the content of *The Last Supper* reflected any great departure in theology."² She also notes that "None of the gospels that we have, including the apocryphal ones, say that Mary, or anyone else besides Jesus and the Apostles, was at that dinner."³

I met a woman on an airplane flight who thought Jesus really was married to Mary Magdalene because her only knowledge of Biblical events came from The Da Vinci Code. Perhaps the above statement by the author was what caused her to accept this tidbit of fiction uncritically.

The Gospels

Much more significant than artwork is the book's portrayal of Scripture and the Gnostic gospels. The former is repudiated while the latter is exalted.

What are we to make of the Gnostic gospels? Previously I had read a little about them and was fairly confident that there was no reason to think that they should be given much credence (the "scholars" of *The Jesus Seminar* loved them – that's reason enough to discount them). I'm now much more certain of their lack of historical and spiritual value. In *The DaVinci Deception*, Erwin Lutzer writes, "For the most part the Gnostic Gospels make no pretense of being an actual record of events; rather, they are simply the musings of various teachers."⁴ These writings aren't historical; they don't contain narratives and aren't intended to convey any record of events. We can't gain any insights into the happenings detailed in the Bible at all.

Here's a quote from one of the Gnostic Gospels:

"God is a dyer. The good yes, true dyes, dissolve into things Dyed in them. So too for things god has dyed. His dyes are imperishable because of their colors. What god dips, he dips in water."

And you thought Timothy Leary's work was so original! This is just one of several such silly verses I read from the Gnostics. Now contrast that with the sort of serious writing we find in Scripture:

"Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught." (Luke 1:1-4, NIV)

Notice that Luke is strongly emphasizing that he is documenting real historical events. The story of Sir William Ramsay has been told many times, but it bears repeating here. It's said (though I'm not sure by whom) that Ramsay is regarded as one of the greatest archeologists ever to have lived. He was of the opinion that the book of Acts was not to be trusted as a historical document until he took up a study of Asia Minor. Ramsay concluded after 30 years of study that "Luke is a historian of the first rank; not merely are his statements of fact trustworthy... this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians"⁵

Speaking of history, why wasn't another world religion used as the basis for a conspiracy novel? I believe it's because no other religion would have the same impact; no other religion has such a well established true history. Teabing remarks in the novel, "history is always written by the winners. When two cultures clash, the loser is obliterated, and the winner writes the history books... By its very nature, history is always a one-sided account."⁶ Such a statement actually bears witness to the historicity of the Bible. Its historical foundation is solid, so the attack is leveled against history itself!

After only a brief review of the Gnostic Gospels, it's obvious why the early Christian fathers and councils rejected them as sacred Scripture. Chief among the reasons to my mind are:

- Their content doesn't match the content of scripture. They are much more like random thoughts than ideas inspired by the Holy Spirit.
- Their authorship is completely unknown in stark contrast to every book of the Bible (with the exception of Hebrews which has its own reasons for being included).
- Their ideas reflect anti-Biblical pagan thought; they aren't consistent with the books of the Bible.
- Their late date (AD 150 to the 4th or 5th century).

Teabing asserts that the Roman emperor Constantine organized the council of Nicea (one of the early church councils) and dictated which gospels would be included in the Bible as a way of manipulating the masses. The fact is that the early church rejected the Gnostic gospels for what they are long before council of Nicea. The councils only confirmed what books the church had already been using. They didn't follow some novel or sinister rule for determining what books should be included. Norman Geisler and William E. Nix write "As an indication of both agreement and the widespread acceptance of the New Testament books, we should note that a generation after the end of the apostolic age, every book of the New Testament had been cited as authoritative by some church father."⁷

The Deity of Christ

It wouldn't be good form for any writing which opposes Christ to fail to diminish his deity. The Da Vinci Code takes it one step further in suggesting that Jesus himself never claimed deity, and that church officials "voted" in his deity as a way to solidify their own power. Teabing follows this claim with the obligatory '*don't mistake me; he was certainly a righteous dude*' line. I don't consider this an attempt to seriously assert that Christians didn't consider Christ God before the Council of Nicaea; anyone who cares to know the truth can discover it after a cursory investigation of the facts. I believe this merely feeds the desire of those who wish it to be true and don't care to know the facts. I have seen this firsthand by the enthusiasm with which those opposed to Christianity embrace the novel.

The Keystone

The deity of Christ is paramount and there is one fact of Christianity that is always faithful to demonstrate such. If we can establish the truth of the resurrection, we can silence the voices of falsehood. Like the "keystone" that the characters in the book sought as the means to unlock the location of the Holy Grail, the resurrection is the church's keystone; the fact upon which it rests. With this keystone, we can prove that Jesus is "God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God" as the Nicene creed so firmly states. If Christ has power over death, then he is God and all his teachings outlined in the Bible (which affirm the resurrection) are validated. Jesus himself validated the Old Testament Scriptures extant during his ministry, and his apostle's

writings hold authority where Gnostic Gospels don't due in no small part to the fact that the Gnostics unanimously reject the resurrection.⁸

The case for the historicity of the resurrection has been made in diverse writings. To my mind, the best argument of proof goes like this:

- A. There is no doubt whatever that the man Jesus Christ lived and died. This fact is documented internally and externally to Scripture.
- B. There is furthermore no doubt that Jewish and Roman leaders wished to stamp out the early Christian movement (the Jewish leaders being most vehement in their rejection of Christ).
- C. The Bible documents emphatically that Jesus was raised from the dead (1 Cor. 15:3-6 says that over 500 people saw Jesus after his resurrection at one time; most being still alive to verify the fact).
- D. Nobody seriously refuted the empty tomb of Jesus. Most notable in this regard are Jesus' greatest enemies, the Jewish religious leaders, who wrote copiously in contempt of him. Lee Strobel, quoting William Lane Craig writes, "the earliest Jewish polemic presupposes the historicity of the empty tomb."⁹
- E. Christianity exploded on the ancient world like no other movement in history in the face of extreme persecution very shortly after the resurrection.
- F. Multitudes of people sacrificed everything to follow the teachings of Christ. People were still living who witnessed the events of Christ's life; the new converts of Christianity were able to directly verify the facts surrounding Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. Even Jesus' enemies could not point to a body or grave that held him. Since the multitudes could prove or disprove the claims, they must have been able to prove them in the affirmative. Movements surrounding false prophets have arisen, but never so many with so much to lose, and most importantly, when they were able to determine the validity of the prophet's claims.

For an excellent historical analysis of the resurrection, I recommend *In The Fullness of Time* by Paul L. Maier (chapters 21-24). Mr. Maier is a professor of ancient history and his sober detailed analysis of the milieu and events of the resurrection will be appreciated by believers and unbelievers alike.

The Conclusion

The resurrection is the conclusion. It is the dividing line of history; the event that gives hope to the world:

"And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead..." (1 Cor 15:17-20).

He is risen!

Notes

¹ Brown, Dan. *The The Da Vinci Code*. Doubleday, 2003, p. 149.

² Newman, Sharan. *The Real History Behind The Da Vinci Code*. The Berkley Publishing Group, 2005, p. 138.

³ Newman, Sharan. *The Real History Behind The Da Vinci Code*. The Berkley Publishing Group, 2005, p. 132.

⁴ Lutzer, Erwin W. *The DaVinci Deception*. Tyndale House Publishers, 2004, p. 22.

⁵ McDowell, Josh. *Evidence that demands a verdict*. Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1979, p. 70-71.

⁶ Brown, Dan. *The The Da Vinci Code*. Doubleday, 2003, p. 164.

⁷ Geisler, Norman and Nix, William E. *A General Introduction to the Bible*. Moody Press, 1986, p. 430.

⁴ Lutzer, Erwin W. *The DaVinci Deception*. Tyndale House Publishers, 2004, p. 99.

⁹ Strobel, Lee. *The Case for Christ*. Zondervan Publishing House, 1998, p. 297.