

Decoding The Da Vinci Code

seminar notes

by Russell Smith

Dan Brown's bestseller The Da Vinci Code is a ripping good page-turner that kept me reading for two days straight. As a action/adventure thriller, the book is a rousing success. However, it has brought about incredible controversy for its theories about Jesus Christ. Because the book spent months atop the bestseller list, and because many of our church members were asking serious questions, I decided to do a two part seminar answering some of the theological and historical questions that the book raises.

As I talked to my colleagues across the country, they began asking for whatever material I might have – they too were dealing with the questions raised by this very popular and very entertaining book. To meet the need of pastors to have reasonable answers to some of these tough questions, I adapted this article from the handouts we created for this class. In this article, I confine myself mainly to historical questions before the council of Nicea. The questions about renaissance art, the Merovingian kings, and theoretical mathematics, while interesting, are not pressing on the faith of Christians across this country. Browns entire conspiracy theory rests upon his dismissal of the Bible as a historical document and his claim that Christianity as we know it was invented by Constantine at the Council of Nicea. Accordingly, I deal mainly with those questions.

For those who are hungry for more detailed answers – look for Darrel Bock's forthcoming book Breaking the Da Vinci Code, coming this fall from Thomas Nelson publishing. I'm hoping that this book will be the resource we all need to give honest answers to the honest questions that arise from this cultural phenomenon.

Central to the plot and ensuing conspiracy theory is the shocking claim that Christianity as we know it was basically invented by Constantine and the council of Nicea (325ad). "Because Constantine upgraded Jesus status almost four centuries after Jesus death, thousands of documents already existed chronicling his life as a mere mortal man. To rewrite the history books, Constantine knew he would need a bold stroke.... Constantine commissioned and financed a new Bible, which omitted those gospels that spoke of Christ's human traits and embellished those gospels that made him godlike. The earlier gospels were outlawed, gathered up and burned." (*The Da Vinci Code*, 234).

This statement raises a host of questions: What did the early Christians really think about Jesus? Are the New Testament documents reliable? What really happened at the council of Nicea? Could Jesus really have married? We will address these questions one by one.

What did the early Christians really think about Jesus?

We have abundant evidence about what early Christians thought about Jesus from the Early Church Fathers. These are writings from the first 400 years of Christianity that were not accepted as scripture, but still honored as reflecting the tradition of Jesus and the Apostles. Phillip Schaff edited the definitive 10 volume set of the Fathers that predate the Council of Nicea (remember, this Council is where Brown says Constantine “invented” Christianity as we know it). Naturally, it makes sense to explore these documents to see what the early church really thought about Jesus. Listed below is but a sampling of this early treasure trove of history and theology. All the below quotations are from the CD Rom version available through AGES Software.

The First Letter of Clement: Clement (AD 30-100), an associate of the apostle Paul, was an elder in the church at Rome. His letter to the Corinthian church is a lovely pastoral sermon written around AD 95. Christians today could benefit from reading Clement’s letter devotionally, for the emphasis is not on theological minutiae, but rather upon humility and unity among believers. Clement does, however, tell us a few things about his understanding of Jesus:

Jesus died for our sins. “Let us look steadfastly to the blood of Christ, and see how precious that blood is to God, which, having been shed for our salvation, has set the grace of repentance before the whole world.” (ch 7)

Jesus rose from the dead. In Chapter 24, Clement writes “Let us consider, beloved, how the Lord continually proves to us that there shall be a future resurrection, of which He has rendered the Lord Jesus Christ the first-fruits by raising Him from the dead.” In chapter 42, Clement says that the early apostles were “...fully assured by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ,”

Jesus is highly esteemed of God, though he chose humility. “Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Scepter of the majesty of God, did not come in the pomp of pride or arrogance, although He might have done so, but in a lowly condition,...” (ch 16)

Jesus confers blessing upon us: “This is the way, beloved, in which we find our Savior, even Jesus Christ, the High Priest of all our offerings, the defender and helper of our infirmity. By Him we look up to the heights of heaven. By Him we behold, as in a glass, His immaculate and most excellent

visage. By Him are the eyes of our hearts opened. By Him our foolish and darkened understanding blossoms up anew towards His marvelous light. By Him the Lord has willed that we should taste of immortal knowledge,..." (from this point, Clement goes on to quote the first chapter of Hebrews, an important biblical reference to Jesus' divinity). (ch 36)

The Didache (pronounced "did-a-kay"): Also called "The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles". This anonymous document contains practical teaching about Christian living and church order. It is mainly concerned with teaching about ethics, how to do baptisms, and right worship. Again, there is little emphasis on theology, however notice the baptismal formula which indicates that Jesus is on par with God the Father and the Holy Spirit:

"...baptize into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, in living water." (ch 7)

The Epistle to Diogenetus This anonymous work has been dated by most scholars around AD 130. Notice in the emphasis on Christ as the divine son of God, his coming return, and his followers willingness to die for their beliefs:

"As a king sends his son, who is also a king, so sent He Him; as God He sent Him; as to men He sent Him; as a Savior He sent Him, and as seeking to persuade, not to compel us; for violence has no place in the character of God. As calling us He sent Him, not as vengefully pursuing us; as loving us He sent Him, not as judging us. For He will yet send Him to judge us, and who shall endure His appearing? ... Do you not see them exposed to wild beasts, that they may be persuaded to deny the Lord, and yet not overcome? Do you not see that the more of them are punished, the greater becomes the number of the rest? This does not seem to be the work of man: this is the power of God; these are the evidences of His manifestation."

Polycarp (AD 65-155) A disciple of John, Polycarp was one of the great martyrs for his faith in Christ. Eusebius, an early church historian, tells us that at his trial, offered clemency if he would merely deny that he was Polycarp, he instead offered to tutor the magistrate in Christian doctrine. In this quote from his first letter to the Philippians, he demonstrates a clear understanding of Jesus' death serving to atone for our sins:

"...our Lord Jesus Christ, who for our sins suffered even unto death, [but] 'whom God raised from the dead, having loosed the bands of the grave.' 'In whom, though now ye see Him not, ye believe, and believing, rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory;' into which joy many desire to enter, knowing that 'by grace ye are saved, not of works,' but by the will of God through Jesus Christ."

Ignatius (AD 30-107) This prolific writer was another disciple of John. He was also martyred for his faith. Tradition says Ignatius was the child that Jesus held when saying “let the children come unto me and do not hinder them”, but this cannot be verified. We have 7 verifiable letters of his. Here, we begin to see an emphasis on theology. In all the other documents we’ve discussed, the theology of Jesus is assumed. Now Ignatius is writing to correct errors in doctrine. As Ignatius describes his opponents, he describes them as believing that Jesus was divine, but that he was never truly human. Notice that this is exactly the opposite view that Brown claims for the early church in the *Da Vinci Code*. Notice the language here describing Jesus as eternally with the Father, spiritually existing before time began, and being born of a virgin.

“But our Physician is the only true God, the unbegotten and unapproachable, the Lord of all, the Father and Begetter of the only-begotten Son. We have also as a Physician the Lord our God, Jesus the Christ, the only-begotten Son and Word, before time began, but who afterwards became also man, of Mary the virgin. For ‘the Word was made flesh.’” (Epistle to Ephesians ch 7)

Justin Martyr (AD 110-165) A Gentile convert to Christianity, most of Justin’s writings engage Greek philosophy and persecution by the Roman empire. Interestingly, he does not engage with any belief that resembles what Brown describes as the true teaching of the early church. Already we see that what Dan Brown describes was not even on the radar of the early church.

Justin’s famous work is an extensive dialogue with Trypho, a Jewish Philosopher, in which he defends the divinity of Christ and proves it from the Old Testament. Below are two quotes from this great work:

“...were they condemned by Reason (or the Word, the Logos) Himself, who took shape, and became man, and was called Jesus Christ...” (First Apology, ch 5)

“Our teacher of these things is Jesus Christ, who also was born for this purpose, and was crucified under Pontius Pilate, procurator of Judaea, in the times of Tiberius Caesar; and that we reasonably worship Him, having learned that He is the Son of the true God Himself, and holding Him in the second place, and the prophetic Spirit in the third...” (First Apology ch 13)

Irenaeus (AD 120-202) Irenaeus was famous for his work *Against Heresies* where he defends early Christian orthodoxy against sects that were challenging orthodoxy. From Lyons, France (According to Brown’s tale, this is supposedly where Mary Magdalene was to have been taken by Joseph of Arimathea), Irenaeus fled to Rome to escape the intense persecution that broke out against Christians during a pagan festival. His massive two volume work catalogs the

intricacies and errors of the so called Gnostic sects. We will interact with Irenaeus in more detail when we talk about the reliability of the New Testament.

However at this point, it is sufficient to draw some conclusions: The early church clearly understood Jesus' divinity, and indeed assumed it in their pastoral and practical teaching. The early church didn't seem to wrestle with anything that looks like the ideas that Dan Brown advances until the late second century with Irenaeus. The early church evidence that we do have essentially devastates Brown's thesis of a conspiracy at Nicea.

However, Brown does raise an interesting question about the formation of the New Testament. He essentially tries to dismiss the New Testament so that he can point us to the so called Gnostic Gospels. And this raises the question –

How did the New Testament come about?

Brown asserts that "The bible did not arrive by fax from heaven." (231) therefore, it is a product of man. "Man created it as a historical record of tumultuous times, and it has evolved through countless translations, additions, and revisions. History has never had a definitive version of the book." (231) The development of the Bible in Brown's view is quite tenuous as well: "...More than eighty gospels were considered for the New Testament, and yet only a relative few were chosen for inclusion...." (231)

While it is true that the Bible didn't arrive by fax, Christianity has never claimed it did. Christianity doesn't teach that God supernaturally took over the bodies of the writers of scripture and guided their hands like a puppet on a string. Rather, Christianity teaches organic inspiration. This is the idea that God speaks through His chosen prophets, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, uses the literary styles and intellectual abilities of his human prophets to deliver written, authoritative, inerrant scripture. Is it a bit harder to grasp? Yes. But see how scripture presents this view.

"We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses to his majesty...And we have the word of the prophets made more certain... Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by a prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." (selections from 2 Peter 1:12-21). The word of God here is from God – and the prophets spoke from God, but they weren't overtaken by God. This lends the idea that the word of God is living and active – the Holy Spirit uses it to penetrate human hearts – see the following passages for details: 2 Timothy 3:15-16, Hebrews 4:12-13,

Psalms 1, 19, and 119. See how God calls and uses human instruments in his call to two of his greatest prophets in Isaiah 6:1-10 and Jeremiah 1:4-10.

Christianity has always maintained the doctrine of organic inspiration – the idea that God supernaturally empowered his prophets to speak through the concerns and issues of the time. Their personality was not overridden, nor their unique writing styles neglected, but the words are authoritative nonetheless because of the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

But what about the selection of books for the New Testament? The early church was always concerned that the documents they accepted as scripture be in the vein of the prophets. They wanted to make sure the documents they accepted as scripture were truly inspired, rather than examples of clever mythmaking. Their main concern was that what they accepted as scripture was genuinely from the apostles or apostolic circle and that it genuinely was inspired by the Holy Spirit.

A testament to this truth was that the discussions in the early church fathers about what should be included focus more on whether the New Testament should be *smaller* than it already is, not *larger*. In the picture that we see from the early church, there was almost no debate about 80 so called gospels. Rather it centered around should we accept all four as scripture. Let's look at a sample from the early fathers to demonstrate.

Clement of Alexandria (1st century AD)– Quotes over 80% of the books of the New Testament. Clement's biggest contribution to this discussion is his strong statement about Paul's letters and about the character of Scripture:

“Truly, under the inspiration of the Spirit, he wrote to you concerning himself, and Cephas, and Apollos, because even then parties had been formed among you.” (ch 47)

“Look carefully into the Scriptures, which are the true utterances of the Holy Spirit. Observe that nothing of an unjust or counterfeit character is written in them.” (ch 45)

Ignatius (first century AD) We have 8 letters falsely attributed to Ignatius – two to apostle John and one to the Virgin Mary – these letters were rejected. These letters would have supported the Christian tradition as we have received it, but the early church was more concerned with authenticity than with doing what it takes to support their position. They declared these false letters if Ignatius to be unreliable. This early rejection demonstrates the real concern for authenticity of documents among the early church community.

Tatian (AD 170) Writes a harmony of the 4 gospels. This is not a harmony of the 80 gospels, but of the 4 gospels. Already, we see a consensus growing as to the authority of the 4 gospels we have in the Bible.

Muratorian Canon (second century AD) This document is a list of books accepted as scripture. It lists almost all the New Testament as authoritative. It does include a few non NT books – books that are right in line with the theology of the existing NT. This list contains none of the so called “lost gospels” that the *Da Vinci Code* claims to be critical.

Justin Martyr (second century AD) His defense of the faith gives us a pretty good view of the early church’s attitude toward scripture and how it was to be used in worship. Notice the characterization of the prophets as being used by God like a musical instrument – this understanding helps further explain the doctrine of inspiration:

“For neither by nature nor by human conception is it possible for men to know things so great and divine, but by the gift which then descended from above upon the holy men, who had no need of rhetorical art, nor of uttering anything in a contentious or quarrelsome manner, but to present themselves pure to the energy of the Divine Spirit, in order that the divine plectrum itself, descending from heaven, and using righteous men as an instrument like a harp or lyre, might reveal to us the knowledge of things divine and heavenly.” (Hortatory address to the Greeks, Ch 8)

“And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things.” (First Apology, ch 67).

Marcion (second century AD) – this second century heretic sparked a huge debate about what was acceptable by proposing his stripped down canon. Marcion’s canon consisted of the gospel of Luke and selected letters of Paul. Everything else he rejects as being less than worthy. This demonstrates the tendency of early dissenters to not add to the existing consensus of scripture, but to challenge it by subtracting from it.

Irenaeus (second century AD) Irenaeus makes some great statements about scripture. Note this rather long statement that acknowledges the power of the Holy Spirit in scripture, the apostolic authority of scripture, and the authority of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John:

“We have learned from none others the plan of our salvation, than from those through whom the Gospel has come down to us, which they did at one time

proclaim in public, and, at a later period, by the will of God, handed down to us in the Scriptures, to be the ground and pillar of our faith. For it is unlawful to assert that they preached before they possessed "perfect knowledge," as some do even venture to say, boasting themselves as improvers of the apostles. For, after our Lord rose from the dead, [the apostles] were invested with power from on high when the Holy Spirit came down [upon them], were filled from all [His gifts], and had perfect knowledge: they departed to the ends of the earth, preaching the glad tidings of the good things [sent] from God to us, and proclaiming the peace of heaven to men, who indeed do all equally and individually possess the Gospel of God. Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome, and laying the foundations of the Church. After their departure, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, did also hand down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter. Luke also, the companion of Paul, recorded in a book the Gospel preached by him. Afterwards, John, the disciple of the Lord, who also had leaned upon His breast, did himself publish a Gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia." (Against Heresies, book 5, ch 1)

Irenaeus shows that the early heretics were neither unified in their views and that they used the existing four gospels as their starting point (not these so called 80 other gospels that Brown references):

"So firm is the ground upon which these Gospels rest, that the very heretics themselves bear witness to them, and, starting from these [documents], each one of them endeavors to establish his own peculiar doctrine. For the Ebionites, who use Matthew's Gospel only, are confuted out of this very same, making false suppositions with regard to the Lord. But Marcion, mutilating that according to Luke, is proved to be a blasphemer of the only existing God, from those [passages] which he still retains. Those, again, who separate Jesus from Christ, alleging that Christ remained impassible, but that it was Jesus who suffered, preferring the Gospel by Mark, if they read it with a love of truth, may have their errors rectified. Those, moreover, who follow Valentinus, making copious use of that according to John, to illustrate their conjunctions, shall be proved to be totally in error by means of this very Gospel, as I have shown in the first book. Since, then, our opponents do bear testimony to us, and make use of these [documents], our proof derived from them is firm and true." (Against Heresies, Book 3, ch 11)

In addition to the gospels, Irenaeus indicates that the letters of Paul were already considered prophetically authoritative at this time too. Irenaeus' writings essentially destroy Brown's thesis.

Athanasius (AD 367) Provides the complete list of the NT canon in the Easter letter of 367. As we have seen, consensus had been growing mainly by the

challenge of those who tried to strip documents out of the existing New Testament. Though this was the first formal declaration of the authorized books of the new testament, the consensus had already been reached and defended over the preceding 300 years.

Shortly thereafter, the synod of Hippo (AD 393) and the synod of Carthage (397) both confirm these 27 books as canonical. Note, contra Brown's insistence, that *the contents of the New Testament was not a main topic at the council of Nicea*: it just wasn't up for debate. Then we must ask, what really did Go on at the council of Nicea?

What really happened at the Council of Nicea?

(Note: My information about events leading up to Nicea is a summary of information from class notes on Church History I, Taught by Frank James (PHD from Oxford) at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, FL, taken in the Spring of 1999. Supplementary texts supporting this history are Justo Gonzalez' *History of Christian Thought* and Kenneth Latourette's *History of Christianity*)

Brown claims that at the council of Nicea, many aspects of Christianity were debated and voted upon – the date of Easter, the role of bishops, the administration of sacraments, and the divinity of Christ. Brown writes, in The Da Vinci Code "...until that moment in history, Jesus was viewed by his followers as a mortal prophet.... a great and powerful man, but a *man* nonetheless. A mortal." (p.233) and further such decision was a matter of political motive. "...establishing Christ's divinity was critical to the further unification of the roman empire and the new Vatican power base." (p.233). This argument is critical to the conspiracy in The Da Vinci Code – is there any truth to it?

Some historical background is in order – until Constantine's conversion in 312, Christianity was ruthlessly persecuted by the pagan Roman authorities. The story goes that Constantine was about to battle Galerius (one of the great persecutors of the church) at the battle of the Milvian Bridge. The morning of the battle, he saw a Christian symbol in the sky and heard a voice saying "with this sign conquer." He converted to Christianity and won the battle. After being declared emperor, he made Christianity the official state religion, but he never understood the theological struggles of Christianity. He convened the Council of Nicea to settle one of those theological struggles: the Arian controversy.

Arius was a pastor in Alexandria, Egypt. He accused Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria, of heresy for his teaching that Jesus was fully and completely God. Arius believed that Jesus was the most powerful created being – higher than the angels, having more divinity than any being in the world, the firstborn of all creation and truly the Son of God, but not fully god (nor fully man for that

matter). The issue at stake was not about “was Jesus god or man”, Arius certainly did not believe that Jesus was man. The issue was “what was the nature of Jesus’ divinity?”

In AD 321, the North African Bishops tried to settle the matter locally in the council of Alexandria. They decided in favor of Alexander. Arius left and started his own church which attracted many followers and threatened to split the early church.

In an effort to preserve peace, Constantine wrote a letter to both men trying to get them to settle their differences. Finally things got so bitter between Arius and Alexander, Constantine called the Council of Nicea; over 300 Christian leaders representing all of Christianity came. This is called the first ecumenical council, because it was supposed to represent the entirety of Christian thought.

The debate centered around the esoteric question of whether the Son is of the same substance of the Father or not. Everyone there believed that Jesus was divine, but they wondered whether he was fully God. After much debate and wrangling, they decide in favor of him being the same substance.

In the aftermath, Constantine softened toward Arius. He converted to Arius’ view and caused considerable turmoil by making Arius’ view the official stance of Christianity. In other words, the “loser” of the council of Nicea became the official Christianity for 50 years until after Constantine’s death. This decision was reversed at the council of Constantinople in AD 379.

The scenario that Dan Brown presents misrepresents the nature of the discussion, misunderstands Constantine’s actions, and is misinformed about the results of the Council. Once again, history proves that the conspiracy theory is wrong.

Is it possible Jesus could have married?

Not likely. Contrary to Brown’s assertion, there were plenty of examples of male bachelorhood in the ancient world. The Essenes were a contemporary sect that vowed themselves to chastity, much like contemporary Catholic priests and nuns. Paul himself is a good example – he talks about bachelorhood as a normal state (I Corinthians 7:29-35). He feels no need to explain his bachelorhood, he just states it as though all would understand and accept it (I Corinthians 7:7).

Other Questions arise from Browns book. My answers here only scratch the surface and are subject to debate, but I believe these answers help advance the discussion.

Did ancient pagans really worship a Sacred Feminine?

Dan Brown spends a lot of his book explaining the idea of the Sacred Feminine:

“the ancients envisioned their world in two halves – masculine and feminine. Their gods and goddesses worked to keep a balance of power. Yin and yang. When male and female were balanced, there was harmony in the world. When they were unbalanced, there was chaos.” “The pentangle is representative of the female half of all things – a concept religious historians call the ‘sacred feminine’ or the ‘divine goddess’” (36)

“The pendulum had swung. Mother Earth had become a *man’s* world, and the gods of destruction and war were taking their toll. The male ego had spent two millennia running unchecked by its female counterpart. The Priory of Sion believed that it was this obliteration of the sacred feminine in modern life that had caused what the Hopi Native Americans called *koyanisquatsi* – ‘life out of balance’ – an unstable situation marked by testosterone-fueled wars, a plethora of misogynistic societies, and a growing disrespect for Mother Earth.” (126)

Here is one of the more silly half truths in the book. Brown is right that most ancient religions were nature based and included both god and goddess worship. However it is reading new age thought back into the ancient world to say that they “worked to keep a balance of power.” Most of the ancient gods and goddesses were pictured as struggling against one another to maintain their own power (consider the depiction of warring gods and goddesses in the *Illiad* and *Oddyseey*).

And the idea that the world was a peaceful harmony until the masculine domination of the church is just silly – anyone with half an inkling of history can show how the ancient world was continually being reinvented by war, strife, and power struggle. Virtually all our ancient texts point to this truth. However, to grant Brown the benefit of the doubt, he probably intends to convey the idea that the world was a peaceful harmony under the agrarian fertility cults, and that lack of balance came with the pagan gods of the nomadic herding peoples (this theory is advanced by Joseph Campbell in *The Power of Myth*).

Switching to this more reasonable scenario (and probably what Brown really has in mind), we have to interact with the nature of pagan fertility worship. Cambridge professor JG Frazer explored the origin of religions in his 12 volume masterpiece *The Golden Bough*. It is a richly detailed study of magic and religion not only as portrayed in the literature of the ancient world, but as practiced in the primitive cultures that were being rediscovered by the West in

the 19th century. This exhaustive work must be reckoned with for anyone who discusses the purpose behind ancient worship. Blessedly, Dr Frazer abridged his massive work into a more manageable single volume. Some of his conclusions that pertain to the sacred feminine: (page references are to *The Golden Bough: A study in magic and religion* by JG Frazer. 1987 printing. Papermac Publishing (a subsidiary of Macmillan)):

- ? Religious rites were forms of sympathetic magic to guarantee that the crops would grow and the rains would return. The closer the rite represented the real thing, the more powerful the magic – thus the sexuality involved in ancient rites was to guarantee crops rather than to attain enlightenment (135)
- ? Nature religions were not exclusively centered on the divine feminine, but also included dying and rising masculine gods – such as Osiris and Dionysus.
- ? Nature religions also included death in their rites. This is one of the main themes of the book; see particularly pages 431-447 for detailed descriptions of human sacrifice as practiced in various nature religions. Indeed, the practice of human sacrifice was even more prominent than the practice of ritual sexuality.

In other words, the ancient rituals of paganism were forms of magic that tried to guarantee crops. And the ritual sexuality (emblematic of the fertility of the crops) was meshed with ritual death. The pagan fertility cults that worshipped the sacred feminine were the same religions that practiced human sacrifice. In the view of these religions, fertility and death went hand in hand as a part of the circle of life. The most recognizable symbol of this combination is the Hindu goddess Kali, who is pictured both as the nurturing mother and as the destructive warrior.

The practices of these ancient fertility religions were condemned by the Old Testament:

“When you enter the land your Lord your God is giving you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there. Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord, and because of these detestable practices, the Lord your God will drive out those nations before you.” (Deuteronomy 18:9-12)

Did the Catholic Church really murder 5 million women goddess worshippers?

Part of the conspiracy in the *Da Vinci Code* rests upon the idea that the church ruthlessly persecuted nature worshippers and tried to obliterate nature religions with the sword.

“...the priory’s tradition of perpetuating goddess worship is based on the belief that powerful men in the early Christian church ‘conned’ the world by propagating lies that devalued the female and tipped the scales in favor of the masculine....The Priory believes that Constantine and his male successors successfully converted the world from matriarchal paganism to patriarchal Christianity by waging a campaign that demonized the sacred feminine, obliterating the goddess from modern religion forever.” (124)

Dan Brown says the church “... indoctrinated the world to ‘the dangers of freethinking women’ and instructed the clergy how to locate, torture, and destroy them.” (125) He describes a holocaust of destruction of female scholars, priestesses, midwives, gypsies, mystics, nature lovers, and anyone attuned to nature. “During three hundred years of witch hunts, the Church burned at the stake an astounding five *million* women.” (125).

The truth is that this number is greatly exaggerated. Historian Rodney Stark’s new book *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch Hunts, and the End of Slavery*, presents the case that the number is much closer to 60,000 – and perhaps a third of those executed were men. Chuck Colson states this summary of Starks findings “...their accusers weren’t fanatical clerics, seeking to suppress heresy. On the contrary, in Spain, home of the infamous Spanish Inquisition, there were far fewer trials for witchcraft than there were by secular officials in the rest of Europe. And those brought to trial were far less likely to be executed. In fact, the Spanish Inquisition sometimes brought charges against the accusers instead.” (BreakPoint article by Chuck Colson, Dec 3, 2003. Find it in the breakpoint archives at pfm.org)

Colson continues by showing that the majority of witch executions were done by the non-Christian enlightenment thinkers, while the church actually tried to mitigate the sentences. “While Christians tried to protect the accused, anti-Christian Enlightenment figures like Thomas Hobbes and Jean Bodin supported the prosecution and execution of so-called witches.

What about the book’s claim about Old Testament Sex Rites?

Brown portrays an esoteric rite called Hieros Gamos – the egyptian sex ritual performed to celebrate the reproductive power of the female

“The ancients believed that the male was spiritually incomplete until he had carnal knowledge of the sacred feminine. Physical union with the female remained the sole means through which man could become spiritually complete and ultimately achieve *gnosis* – knowledge of the divine. Since the days of Isis, sex rites had been considered man’s only bridge from earth to heaven “by communing with woman ... man could achieve a climactic instant when his mind was totally blank and he could see God.” (309).

We’ve already seen how Frazer debunks the idea that there is attainment mystic enlightenment going on in the widespread fertility rituals of the ancient world. Dan Brown then makes this extraordinary claim:

“...the early Jewish tradition involved ritualistic sex. *in the temple no less.* Early Jews believed that the Holy of Holies in Solomon’s temple housed not only God but also his powerful female equal, Shekinaah. Men seeking spiritual wholeness came to the temple to visit priestesses – or hierodules – with whom they made love and experienced the divine through physical union.”

Here Brown demonstrates a half truth – there was indeed nature worship and sexuality in the temple and tabernacle of ancient Israel – however the Old Testament scriptures pronounce God’s judgment against such actions. I Samuel 2 tells the story of Hophni and Phineas, who among other things were engaging in ritual sexuality with the ladies who served in the tabernacle. Later in the same chapter, God pronounces his judgment against them.

The Prophet Ezekiel who was in exile in Babylon was given a vision from the Lord of all the evil deeds that were being done in the temple of God in Jerusalem.

“And he said to me ‘Son of man, do you see what they are doing – the utterly detestable things the house of Israel is doing here, things that will drive me far from my sanctuary?... So I went in and looked, and I saw portrayed all kinds of crawling things and detestable animals and all the idols of the house of Israel.... He said to me ‘Son of man, have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel are doing in the darkness, each at the shrine of his own idol? They say ‘The Lord does not see us; the Lord has forsaken the land’.... Then he brought me to the north gate of the house of the Lord, and I saw women sitting there mourning for Tammuz.... He then brought me to the inner court of the house of the Lord, and there at the entrance of the temple... were about twenty-five men. With their backs toward the temple of the Lord and their faces toward the east, they were bowing down to the sun in the east. He said to me “Have you seen this, son of man? Is it a trivial matter for the house of Judah to do the detestable things they are doing here? Must they also fill the land with violence and continually provoke me to anger?” (From Ezekiel 8)

In the midst of a passage of judgment, we see condemnation of the death/fertility cults in Israel. “In you are slanderous men bent on shedding blood; In you are those who eat at the mountain shrines and commit lewd acts.” (Ezekiel 22:9)

The law of Moses forbade the ritual sexual practices of the pagan nations. “Do not set up any wooden Asherah pole beside the altar you build to the Lord your God, and do not erect a sacred stone, for these the Lord your God hates.” (Deuteronomy 16:12-22)

Ritual sexual acts did exist in ancient Israel, but they were condemned.

What does the Bible really teach about masculinity/femininity?

Dan Brown indicates that Original sin is a product of a male church seeking to demonize the sacred feminine (238) “Christian philosophy decided to embezzle the female’s creative power by ignoring biological truth and making man the creator. Genesis tells us that Eve was created from Adam’s rib. Woman became an offshoot of man. And a sinful one at that. Genesis was the beginning of the end for the goddess...For obvious reasons, they worked hard to demonize sex and recast it as a disgusting and sinful act. Other major religions did the same.”

The truth is that the Bible itself, rightly read, does not denigrate women. The creation story in Genesis indicates that God created both men and women in the Divine image “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” (Genesis 1:27). .

In Genesis 2:18, God describes his intent to create a “suitable helper” to Adam. The term helper is not a derogatory term – rather it is a term of respect and joint effort. The Hebrew word used here is also used in Psalm 54:4 to describe God’s work on our behalf and the same concept describes the work of the Holy Spirit within the believer (John 14:16-17). From the very outset, the Bible ennobles women, in contrast to other pagan religions of the Ancient Near East, where women were considered property of the man.

As for the Bible’s view of sex. Sex is not viewed as a disgusting and sinful act as Brown claims. The entire text of Song of Solomon is a love poem containing some graphic sexual imagery. Indeed Paul positively commends it, enjoyed within the boundaries of marriage, in I Corinthians 7:3-5

“The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife’s body does not belong to her alone but also to her

husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone, but also to his wife. Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer."

What is the opportunity in this book for Christians?

The main point in this course is to help us seize the opportunities that God has placed before us in this book being published.

1) The book raises questions in people all around us. It creates a spiritually sensitized environment in which we can share the gospel. You may consider following this course with *Becoming a Contagious Christian*, produced by Willow Creek church. Or perhaps you'll want to pick up Lee Stroebel's great book *The Case for Christ* so you can familiarize yourself to the reasonableness of Christianity.

2) Helps us see into some of the deep yearnings in our culture and how we can speak the gospel to these yearnings.

This is one of the great benefits of what has been called "cultural exegesis" – we as Christians need to be able to answer honest questions, but we also need to be able to look under the hood of other worldviews and be able to honestly and gently ask the tough questions. When we can look at a text like the Da Vinci Code and ask "What deep human needs is this addressing, and how does Christianity answer them?" then we are honestly engaging the culture rather than engaging in shrill polemic.

A great resource to this end is Francis Schaeffer's *The God who is There*. Schaeffer analyzes western culture for the past 150 years and shows the descent from an understanding of objective truth to total relativism.. However, he does this with a heartfelt empathy for the poor souls who are caught up in this decent.

Yearnings that I see reflected:

? The longing for relationships – the estrangement of Sophie from her grandfather is only perpetuated by his death. But by their shared love of art, puzzles, and riddles, they have a sense of connection across the ages. Then she rediscovers her lost family and reconnects with them. And of course there is the romance with Langdon. Parallel is the relationship of the Bishop with Silas – even though the relationship gets twisted, there is a kind of reconciliation at the end.

- ? Suspicion of traditional authority structures – the nature of conspiracy is to question authority. This is a running theme in postmodern thought as well: authority and power are always suspect and always not to be trusted.
- ? Yearning for the life affirming experiences– the classic contrast of Opus Dei vs. the Priory of Sion. Doctrine vs. experience. Self inflicted punishment vs. communal pleasure.
- ? Fascination with the exotic. This is not a tale set in Boise – it takes place in the esoteric and exotic places of Europe. This setting plays in to the previous point – the great works of art and architecture stir our hearts in profound ways – we experience them as we stand before them – Brown is simply trying to direct our experience of these works in a particular way.
- ? Desire for a coherent set of answers – Everything Langdon presents seems to point toward the sacred feminine – Phi, Art, Pentangle, Math, history, roses, Longitude and latitude, astronomy. Postmodernity is characterized by a loss of the “metanarrative” – the overarching story that ties us all together (a poetic way of saying ultimate truth) – and yet the story demonstrates a deep yearning for just that – bedrock truth.

Remember that God is sovereign over all. Some Christians see this book as a threat and get angry. Others dismiss it with a wave of their hands. I prefer the Paul on Mars Hill solution in Acts 17. Look to the redemptive elements in the book. Be able to expose error. And always be ready to present Christ to this hurting and broken world.