

Deconstructing DaVinci, Part I

"Leveraging the DaVinci Code"

Many of you are asking in your mind, "Why in the world are we here today wasting time discussing a work of fictional novel about Jesus Christ?" "Are we not just giving it more attention and credit by talking about it in church?" Today I want to seek the real truth. I think by knowing part of the background of the movie will provide you the answer to your questions.



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One of the most interesting things about the making of this movie were two polar opposite attitudes toward the story by the two different churches highlighted in the book.

The first church is historic Westminster Abby in London, which is the scene of a climactic scene in the book. Director Ron Howard asked permission to film the movie inside the Abby, but the officials there turned him down cold. They said the novel is filled with "factual errors" and is "theologically unsound" and therefore they weren't going to open their doors for the film.

Many Christians in America are reacting the same way – let's protest the film, let's ignore it and hope it goes away, let's boycott it and maybe picket it. Friends, I can totally understand that attitude, because my initial reaction to hearing the theology and premises of the book was less than desirable. After all, the novel says that everything we've been told about Jesus is wrong; that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene and they had a child named Sarah; that the four Gospels in the New Testament are unreliable; and, most seriously, that Jesus was a mere human being who never claimed to be God, but who was deified in the fourth century by the Roman Emperor Constantine for his own despicable purposes. These are outrageous accusations that cut to the core of Christianity – and which cannot withstand scrutiny.

And yet because Dan Brown cleverly blends fact with fiction, many people think these allegations are true. A recent poll indicates that one out of every three Canadians who have read the book actually believes there are descendants of Jesus walking among us today. According to pollster George Barna, over half of American readers – 53 percent – said the book has been helpful in their "personal spiritual growth and understanding." There's good reason to be upset that people are buying the book's premise that Christianity is a fraud. Even so, I'm not so sure that protesting the movie or hoping it will go away is the right approach for Christians to take.

The second church in the story was Lincoln Cathedral. After being turned away from Westminster Abby, Ron Howard went there in the hopes he could transform the interior of this ancient church into a replica of the Abby for his movie. Cathedral officials were just as critical of Brown's book as the Abby officials were. They called it "speculative and far-fetched" and even heretical in places. But then they said something very interesting: "The book claims that the church has suppressed important facts about Jesus. The way to counter this accusation is to be open about the facts and welcome vigorous debate." They decided to let Howard inside to film. Whether that was the right choice or not is debatable, but I do agree with their basic point, which is that dialogue and engagement are much more productive than protesting and picketing. Consider what happened in Acts 17 when the Apostle Paul traveled to Athens – once the center of classical antiquity and home of such famous philosophers as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. And it was a city dedicated to idol worship. In fact, Athens had more statues of gods and goddesses than all the other cities of the day combined.

So in walks the apostle Paul. Was he repulsed by what he saw? Absolutely! Verse 16 says he was "greatly

distressed to see that the city was full of idols.” I bet part of him didn’t want to just picket and protest – he probably wanted to smash a few statues before lunch! Yet he knew he was facing a choice: He could either lash out or he could reach out. He could either attack the Athenians or he could attract them – but he couldn’t do both at the same time.

So he decided to engage with them. Verse 17 says: “So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there.” Whoever he encountered, wherever he encountered them – Paul initiated spiritual conversations. In fact, he was taken to the Areopagus to face the intellectual elites of Athens – and in verse 22 he actually congratulates them for being spiritual. He says, “Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious.” In effect, he was building a bridge by saying, Hey we have something in common. You’re religious and so am I. Let’s build on that.

With that as a starting point, he delivered a brilliant discourse, giving them persuasive reasons for believing in Jesus Christ, who proved He’s the Son of God by returning from the dead. In fact, Paul clearly knew their stuff – he had read their book and seen their movie, so to speak – and he quoted from confidence from their own sources. And how did people react? Verse 32 says, “When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, ‘We want to hear you again on this subject.’” And verse 34 adds, “A few men became followers of Paul and believed.”

Friends, Christianity is facing a huge challenge with The Da Vinci Code. We all want to be more like the originals disciples of Christ and have their opportunities, right? Well, today we have the same choice Paul faced in the first century: we can lash out or we can reach out – and based on the Paul’s approach, I think our decision is clear. Let’s build bridges like Paul did by celebrating that many people are becoming spiritually curious because of the book and movie – and seize this opportunity to engage them in conversations that could change their lives and eternities.

Now, sometimes Christians complain that it’s difficult to initiate discussions about Christianity. Well, let me tell you something: since this movie hit the theaters it difficult not to get into spiritual conversations! People love to talk about The Da Vinci Code! So how can we engage with this evangelistic adventure? There are three actions we can all take: We can pray, we can prepare, and we can participate.

I. Pray.

Pray - After all, that’s what Jesus did – in fact, have you ever thought about the fact that Jesus’ prayers for spiritually lost people continued right up until his final gasps on the cross? As British Pastor John Stott pointed out, the imperfect tense of the Greek in which the New Testament was written tells us that Jesus didn’t just say it once, but he kept repeating it over and over on the cross – while the nails were being driven through his feet, while the nails were being driven through his hands, all through the torture of the crucifixion – he kept repeating, “Father, forgive them...Father, forgive them...Father, forgive them, for they know now what they do.” In that case, how can we justify not praying specifically, fervently, and consistently for our spiritually lost friends? We need to pray that they wouldn’t be confused by the foolishness of the Da Vinci Code, that God would open their eyes to their need for a Savior, that He would open their eyes to the truth of Scripture, that he would prepare their hearts for the Gospel and draw them toward His kingdom. And we should pray for ourselves – that God would open the door to spiritual conversations with our friends, that he would guide our words and attitude, that he would give us the love and courage we need to point people toward the true Jesus. There are many of you that pray for spiritually lost friends and family. I’m naive enough to believe James 5:16 that says, “The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.” I particularly like the words of Mother Teresa: “When I pray, coincidences happen; when I stop, they don’t.” Who is God bringing into your mind right

now who you should be praying for so that you might seize the opportunity of The Da Vinci Code to bring them the Gospel? There's no way we can bring about the conversion of anyone; but on the other hand, God can use us in the process of bringing people to faith in Him. So first, we can pray.

II. Prepare.

Remember the tsunami that hit the islands off Indonesia without warning and killed so many people a year and a half ago? What if scientists had been able to warn the residents in advance? That would have given them enough time to get to higher ground and avoid being swept away. Well, America is being hit with a spiritual tsunami with The Da Vinci Code movie. But the good news is that we can prepare ourselves so we can help people avoid being inundated by heretical teaching and having their faith shipwrecked. In fact, the Bible told us 2,000 years ago that we need to be prepared.

First Peter 3:15 says, "Always be prepared to give an answer to anyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. And do this with gentleness and respect." If you're going to be effective in reaching out to people who may be spiritually confused by The Da Vinci Code, then you need to be familiar, first, with the story itself and, second, with the reasons why its claims don't withstand scrutiny. So does that mean you should read the book or see the movie? Well, here's my opinion: If you're going to take advantage of the Da Vinci Code to reach out to friends and neighbors, then you at least need to be familiar with the story. You might be able to do that by reading a good summary of the book which we are going to have 4 study sessions over after church in the coming weeks. Or, if you're going to read The Da Vinci Code itself, I'd suggest buying a used copy at Amazon.com, so Dan Brown doesn't get a royalty. If the film is the issue then you have to see it to discuss it. I will say this: the minute you try to engage someone about the Da Vinci Code, the first question they're going to ask is: have you read the book or seen the movie? If you say "no," your credibility is shot. If all you want is entertainment, then go see something else and buy a different book. But even if you know your Bible well, you're not going to be prepared to respond to the issues raised by the movie. There are too many issues concerning church history and ancient history. So I'd recommend you read at least one book that critiques The Da Vinci Code. Again, we have those available and you can study it with us. I'm also going to tell you about a website that makes a whole bunch of free material available for you including video clips of interviews with experts. (www.leestrobels.com). So you should pray and prepare.

III. Participate.

Third, you must participate. In other words, jump into the adventure and engage people as Paul did in Acts 17 and as Jesus did with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4. **(1)** Basically, just Walk Across the Room and intentionally seek out opportunities to engage in conversations about The Da Vinci Code with people you encounter in your everyday life. This is a level everyone can participate on! What you'll find it that it has never been easier to get into a spiritual conversation. I do it all the time. Just ask, "Say, have you seen the Da Vinci Code?" If they say yes – and there are some estimates that nearly one out of every three Americans has read it – then I ask, "Did you like it?" Then my followup question is: "What percentage of it do you think is true?" Now, it's a good idea to have a resource handy to put into their hands if you can't spend a lot of time in the conversation. That's why the church has extra copies of this study book for you to give to your friends and family. Let's face it: we're more apt to get into spiritual conversations if we know we don't have to necessarily bring it to resolution right then and there, but we can give them a book that will answer all their questions. **(2)** Invite people into our discussion group. The Da Vinci Code movie is a great impetus for saying to people, "Hey, I know you liked the book or movie – how'd you like to join a group to discuss some of the main

issues that Dan Brown raises?" You can start a group on your own or invite them here to church.

Friends, when we pray, when we prepare, and when we participate – I believe God is going to use this entire Da Vinci Code debacle for His glory. While it's a bit disingenuous coming from him, even Tom Hanks, who stars in the movie, got it right when he said, "I think the movie may end up helping churches do their job. If they put up a sign saying, 'This Wednesday we're discussing the gospel,' 12 people show up. But if the sign says, 'This Wednesday we're discussing The Da Vinci Code, 800 people show up.'"

You remember the story of Joseph, who was betrayed by his brothers, sold into slavery, and yet eventually rose to the highest governmental levels of Egypt, where he was able to save many from starvation. In the end, his brothers thought Joseph would punish them for their betrayal – but instead, Joseph forgave them. As he said in Genesis 50:20: "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good..." I don't know why Dan Brown wrote The Da Vinci Code. For the life of me, even though it's a good read, I don't know why it has become one of the biggest-selling novels in history. But I do know this: the final chapter of The Da Vinci Code has yet to be written. Because God can turn what has wrought so much ill and use it to accomplish so much good – and the best news is that He's inviting you and me to participate in that process. So let's commit ourselves and our seeking friends to God.