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## THE DA VINCI CODE: TOOL FOR EVANGELISM?

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Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* has generated the sort of controversy that will sustain it for months into the future, especially after it goes into paperback and Ron Howard's movie, which is based on the book, is released. Controversy, of course, stirs sales.

Christians are now in something of a dilemma. They can reduce the controversy — and therefore *Da Vinci* sales — by ignoring the novel, or they can sustain the controversy — and therefore sales — by giving a spirited response. Considering the attack on the historic Christian faith posed by Brown's novel, only the latter would seem the proper option. Besides, a massive Christian response via books and the Internet, as well as media appearances by knowledgeable experts, may finally demonstrate to millions of gullible, conspiracy-happy readers that they are victims of one of the great literary hoaxes of modern times.

Public discussion of Christ, Christianity, and the church is again front-and-center in media attention. The book's attacks against the Christian faith ironically provide Christians with a unique opportunity for effective evangelism. Sharing the truth in this case, however, will require some restraint.

In view of the unfounded, actually outrageous claims Brown makes in his novel, an angry gut reaction against his falsehoods naturally wells up in any informed Christian reader, and the temptation to trash the man can be almost overwhelming. If, however, we engage secular or ill-informed Christians in dialogue over the book with a fuming tirade, we will not persuade them to reconsider their opinion, especially if they enjoyed reading it. We, not Dan Brown, will lose credibility. Ire, therefore, is hardly the best way to evangelize effectively, and it seems that the apostle Peter learned that lesson, and that's why he wrote: "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" (1 Pet. 3:15 NIV). "Sweet reason" remains both the best shield and the best weapon in any struggle for the truth.

Readers' reactions to *The Da Vinci Code* come in all colors, shapes, and sizes. Here is a list of some you may encounter, along with suggested responses.

**"I thought *The Da Vinci Code* was a fun read."** Why not agree? It *was* an interesting mystery, and this is why the novel borders on the diabolical: the poison is served up hidden inside tasty flavoring! You must, however, go to the heart of the issue and ask, "Do you think the author presented an honest, accurate portrait of Christ and Christianity?" If the person's response has even a hint of the positive, you'll have much work to do, beginning with an explanation of some important basics of the Christian faith, such as the deity of Christ, which is clearly denied in the novel.

**"OK, a few things may be wrong in the novel, but basically it's factual."** This is probably the most common reaction to *Da Vinci*, and it demonstrates that the reader is either a non-Christian or a believer who is very poorly grounded in the faith. A useful response might be to point out that *more* than "a few things" are wrong in the novel; for example, the entire premise of *The Da Vinci Code* is based on a false "fact." On the first page, Brown claims that a secret European society called "The Priory of Sion," which supposedly preserved the secret "truth" about the "real" Jesus, was founded in Jerusalem in 1099, when, instead, it was officially registered in France in 1956. Another example would be what Brown calls the "relatively close vote" at the Council of Nicea endorsing Jesus' divinity (233). In fact, the vote was 300 to 2! Probably the worst error in the book is the claim that "the early Jewish tradition involved ritualistic sex. *In the temple, no less*" (309, emphasis in original). Not only is this a horrendously unfounded claim,

but it is also a blasphemous affront to both Judaism and Christianity. There are dozens upon dozens of such falsehoods throughout the book.

**“Chill out! This is fiction, after all!”** Right, except that, on the very first page of the book, the author *claims* his novel is based on fact; unfortunately, too many people today read fiction but accept it as fact. When real situations or personalities — past or present — are involved in fictional backgrounds, a good writer will strive to represent them accurately. You might ask, “How fair or credible would you find a novel set in the World War II era, for example, that claimed Adolf Hitler won the war and executed Franklin D. Roosevelt?” The distortion of facts in *The Da Vinci Code* is just as grotesque.

**“But the author says he did a lot of research to uncover the real truth.”** So he did. In media interviews, Dan Brown even states he, too, was skeptical at first, but the “evidence” convinced him otherwise. Sound reassuring? In sober fact, the sources listed by Brown have no scholarly or historical value whatever; rather, they are sensationalizing tripe, New Age esoterica, and conspiracy speculations that all serious scholars disdain.

**“I still believe that Brown is really on to something and that the church has engaged in a vast cover-up.”** You might respond, “Then you are exactly the sort of impressionable reader who is being seduced by Brown’s deceptions.” (OK, leave out the “impressionable” so as not to antagonize your dialogue partner!) You should then ask, “Can you identify even *one* serious scholar, writer, professional authority, historian, or theologian *anywhere in the world* who agrees with Brown?” I seriously question if Brown *really* believes his own material despite his claims that he does. *The New York Times* certainly does not, since its February 22, 2004, book review aptly referred to his novel as “The *Da Vinci* Con.”

**“Look, this material must be reasonable and accurate or a prestigious New York publisher such as Doubleday would never have published it.”** We should be careful not to ascribe high moral values to any secular publisher where the fiscal bottom line is concerned, nor indulge the fantasy that “if it’s in print, it must be true.” Amazingly careless editing went into *The Da Vinci Code*. The book bulges with factual errors, but no one is faulting the editor, at least not when seven million copies are in print!

In other cases, either malicious intent or editorial ignorance is involved. In 1970, John M. Allegro’s *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross* (Doubleday) appeared, in which the author seriously argued that Jesus was invented by myth-makers who got high on the hallucinogenic qualities of the red-topped, white-flecked fly agaric mushroom and wrote the Gospels to communicate their cultic secrets. Allegro’s colleagues in England called the book “a Semitics [i.e., the study of Jewish history] scholar’s erotic nightmare,” and it faced similar derision on this side of the Atlantic. This book, of course, is an intellectual fraud from beginning to end. “In print” does not equal “true.”

**“The main plot of the book has Jesus marrying Mary Magdalene. What’s wrong with that?”** If Jesus *had* married her, it would not have been wrong, but there is no evidence *whatever* that Jesus ever married. Conversely, there is powerful evidence that He did *not*. In fact, Paul defended his right to have a wife (a prerogative that he never exercised) when he wrote, “Don’t we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord’s brothers and Cephas [Peter]?” (1 Cor. 9:5 NIV). If Jesus Himself had ever married, Paul would *surely* have cited His marriage as the greatest precedent of all, after which it would have been unnecessary even to mention figures subordinate to Him. To claim that the church covered up the “fact” of Jesus’ marriage to Mary Magdalene because this would have humanized Him out of any divinity, so to speak, is outrageous, but this is exactly what *The Da Vinci Code* maintains as its central thesis.

**“I really enjoyed the book until, about halfway through, I started reading the most despicable statements about my faith. I made a list of the errors until I ran out of paper.”** Yes! At last! *The proper reaction!* No response necessary, except congratulations to an informed Christian.

**Are Christians Supplying Answers?** In the face of Brown’s gratuitous assaults on the faith, Christians have not been sleeping. No less than 10 books currently are being published that provide a devastating critique of *The Da Vinci Code*. These range from Darrell L. Bock’s *Breaking the Da Vinci Code* (Thomas

Nelson, 2004), which rivals Brown's book in size, to the 96-page *The Da Vinci Code — Fact or Fiction?* (Tyndale House, 2004), written by Hank Hanegraaff and me.

The current powerful Christian response to Dan Brown's novel *is* proving to be effective. I've now heard hundreds of potential *Da Vinci Code* readers confess, "Well, I was going to buy the book, but now I won't waste my money." In any case, the *Da Vinci Code* discussion can be a blessing in disguise if it encourages people to reexamine the *true* facts about Christ, Christianity, and the church. Every informed believer can, *and should*, help in the process.

— Paul L. Maier