

ACTS 29 AND BEYOND

By Rev. Will Nelken

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Rusty Benson, of Agape Press, says, “What the Passion of the Christ is to Christians and Brokeback Mountain is to homosexual rights advocates, The Da Vinci Code (movie) promises to be to the foes of Christianity.”

Pastor, church historian, and author, James Garlow, asserts, “The Da Vinci Code is one of the most serious attacks on the church, in terms of effectiveness, that I’ve seen in my lifetime. By that I mean it’s an attack on the Bible itself and the divinity of [Jesus] Christ.”

Since publication in 2003, the book, The Da Vinci Code, has sold nearly 40 million copies, and this month Sony’s Columbia Pictures will release the film version.

Though it is fiction, according to its publishers, author Dan Brown not only challenges the trustworthiness of the Scripture and implicates the Roman Catholic Church in the biggest cover-up of all time, but so effectively blurs the line between historical fact and fiction that some readers are sure to come away confused.

Quoting from the opening page of the book, a page titled in bold, capital letters, “FACT”: “All descriptions of artwork, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate.”

This blanket statement simply is not true. In fact, it is false in more cases than it is true. But the result for most readers, unfamiliar with the facts, is that it appears true and breeds significant confusion.

Mark 9:14 And when [Jesus] came to the disciples, He saw a great multitude around them, and scribes disputing with them.

¹⁵ Immediately, when they saw Him, all the people were greatly amazed, and running to Him, greeted Him. ¹⁶ And He asked the scribes, “What are you discussing with them?”

¹⁷ Then one of the crowd answered and said, “Teacher, I brought You my son, who has a mute spirit.

¹⁸ And wherever it seizes him, it throws him down; he foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth, and becomes rigid. So I spoke to Your disciples, that they should cast it out, but they could not.”

¹⁹ He answered him and said, “O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you? Bring him to Me.”²⁰ Then they brought him to Him. And when he saw Him, immediately the spirit convulsed him, and he fell on the ground and wallowed, foaming at the mouth.

²¹ So He asked his father, “How long has this been happening to him?”

And he said, “From childhood.”²² And often he has thrown him both into the fire and into the water to destroy him. But if You can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.”

²³ Jesus said to him, “If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes.”

*²⁴ Immediately the father of the child cried out and said with tears, “Lord, I believe; **help my unbelief!**”*

This story can only strengthen unbelief—among Christians, seekers, and non-believers—unless we understand where fiction departs from fact. To make this distinction more difficult, the truth relies on church history more than Scripture, an area in which most Christians are weak. Therefore, I will begin there today.

Four Themes

There are four major contentions (fiction presented as fact) that must be addressed. While I hope to present these matters fairly, I think you will have no doubt which side of each issue I land on and why. The four are these:

1. What can history really tell us? Was Roman Emperor Constantine a co-conspirator with the Roman Catholic Church to suppress the truth about Jesus? Was Jesus' deity decided by the vote of a council of bishops at Nicaea? This, we will consider today.
2. Can we trust the four gospels? How did we get the books of the Bible we read today? Who decided which books to include?
3. What is the role of women in Christianity? Was Mary Magdalene really an apostle and the original leader of the Christian church? Was Jesus actually married to Mary Magdalene? Did Leonardo da Vinci paint Mary Magdalene into "The Last Supper" to perpetuate this story?
4. Is Jesus really the Son of God? Did He ever make such a claim? If so, why should anyone believe Him? How can we know?

The last three we will consider over the next three Sundays.

Re-Writing History

In less than one generation, the history of an event no less horrific, well-documented, and well-known than the holocaust of World War II (Hitler's campaign against the Jewish race) has been revised. Called "an invention" and "a conspiracy to deceive," recent history is being re-invented to deny that it ever happened, that six million men, women, and children were not murdered. "Unbelievable!" you say? But it is so.

Even in the days of the apostles, Paul wrote to warn of the "many, which corrupt the word of God" (2 Corinthians 2:17), so it is not a new maneuver. In fact, it's been around since the beginning: "Now the serpent was the shrewdest of all the creatures the Lord God had made. 'Really?' he asked the woman. 'Did God really say...?'" (Genesis 3:1).

Manipulating and editing the Word of God to write a story more in keeping with a *desired* "reality" has frequently introduced the world to new religions. What is more amazing is the durability of the Scripture in the face of so many attacks. The Bible is still the best seller of all time and the most read book on the planet. Could a work of fiction ever achieve such status? There is clearly something more to this than meets the eye.

The Book of Acts describes the founding of the Early Church and its expansion. Curiously, the book has no real conclusion — it simply stops, as though the author expected to write another chapter. Indeed, we might say the Book of Acts has never been closed, but continues to be written through the lives of Christ's followers around the world to this very day.

The Council at Nicaea

The Early Church continued to grow and spread the gospel in the face of persecution and alternate belief systems. The government of Rome perfected the persecution of Christians in various horrific and deadly ways, yet the church persisted through decades of social hostility. Forced into hiding by society, the church nevertheless flourished, as it has repeatedly in various places, periods and cul-

tures, when persecution again became rampant; as it is today in parts of Africa and Asia that are closed to the preaching of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Ironically, the church's earliest persecutor, the government of Rome, at last became its greatest evangelist. Near the beginning of the fourth century A.D. a Roman emperor and general, Constantine, had a vision of a blazing cross in the sky and heard a voice admonishing him, "By this sign, conquer." He was so impressed that he had the sign emblazoned on his helmet and every soldier's shield, and his military victories reinforced his faith. Constantine's conversion to Christianity was a watershed in church history. Rome became a "Christian" empire and every citizen became a "Christian." For nearly 300 years, it was relatively safe and approved to become a Christian.

However, the Eastern and Western Empires were badly divided by schisms, sects, and cults, centering mostly around the issue of Jesus' identity and divinity. Constantine sought to unite these two major streams and called a council of bishops at Nicaea to discuss their issues and conclude their arguments. In fact, he personally paid the travel expenses of over 200 bishops to attend the Council and hosted them in his own summer lake palace. Yet, he had no ecclesiastical authority himself in the proceedings.

The Da Vinci Code's historian character,

Teabing, presents Constantine as a conspirator, saying, "At this gathering...many aspects of Christianity were debated and voted upon—the date of Easter, the role of bishops, the administration of the sacraments, and, of course, the divinity of Jesus. Jesus' establishment as 'the Son of God' was officially proposed and voted upon by the Council of Nicaea" (page 233).

The facts are significantly different. Jesus' divinity was not voted upon at the Council of Nicaea. His deity is affirmed by the earliest Christian documents we have—as early as 55 A.D. Bishops from around the world gathered to discuss not *if* Jesus was divine (that was a foregone conclusion), but in *what sense* He was divine: was He eternal or created?

The generally accepted view was that Jesus existed eternally as the Son with the Father. An alternate proposal, coming from Presbyter Arius of Africa (a view which Constantine apparently personally preferred) suggested that Jesus was not divine by nature, but had been created by God in ages past. This was loudly refuted, and all but two bishops signed off on precise philosophical and theological language that affirmed what the majority of the Church already believed. No sign of a power-grab or a cover-up there.

History has been re-written again by Dan Brown. But the facts refute his version. Remember, his book is found in the *fiction* section; it's just a story. Some, today, would still prefer an alternative to the truth, and there are many available, but none will stand the threefold test of mass approval, endurance over time, and historical confirmation. The Bible story is the truth, and, as Jesus said, "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."