

DE-CODING DA VINCI: “FACT, FICTION, FAITH”

In 2003 Dan Brown wrote a novel called *The Da Vinci Code*, which has become one of the all time best selling novels in history. It sold more than 6 million hardback copies in its first year. The paper back version was released about a month ago, and it has already sold over a million copies. It is being made into a major motion picture that will be released on May 19th. The movie is directed by “Opie”, Ron Howard, and stars world famous, Tom Hanks. This single book has created more stir than the whole series of *Left Behind* ‘novels’, and is being featured by newsmagazines on television, preached against in churches, studied in small groups, and is being discussed next to water-coolers across our country; and around the world in the 40 different languages into which it has been translated.

Why all the stir about a novel, a book of fiction, a fanciful story; and why this sermon series? Well, it has to do with the subject matter of the book, and more so because of the way the subject matter is presented in the book. The problem is highlighted by author Dan Brown himself in an interview with Ruth Mariampolski for *Borders, Inc.* “One of the many qualities that make *The Da Vinci Code* unique is the factual nature of the story. All the history, artwork, ancient documents, and secret rituals in the novel are accurate, as are the hidden codes revealed in some of da Vinci’s most famous paintings.”

It is the interplay between fact and fiction; wed masterfully by Mr. Brown in this fast-paced, easy to read, mystery thriller that causes me (and others) concern enough to tackle its intricacies.

For the record, I loved the book, I enjoyed reading it, I was fascinated by the story, and somewhat troubled by the apparent distortion of some of the facts. I don't think it is evil, I won't discourage any to read it, and I'm planning to attend the movie. I'd invite any of you to join a small group meeting to discuss the book on Wednesdays at 6:15 right here.

Here are the three primary problems I observed emerging from the books mixture of fact and fiction. These will become the subjects of the three sermons in this series. #1, today. Brown advocates in the book (fiction, I remind you) that all religious history is fabricated. #2, May 14th. Brown proposes that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene and they parented a child whose lineage is still present in our world today. And #3, May 21st. He proposes in this fictional account that Jesus' status as Divine Son of God, was not originally intended in the Bible, but added and approved later by Constantine and others at the council of Nicea, and only then by a narrow margin vote! We begin today to discuss the facts, fiction and faith regarding Religious History, and since we are a Christian church, we'll limit our discussion to our Christian history.

Let me introduce you briefly to the characters that will be mentioned in the coming weeks. The heroine of the story is a woman named Sophie Neveu. She is the estranged granddaughter of the primary curator of the Louvre Art Museum in Paris. Robert Langdon is the hero, a professor of religious symbology at Harvard University. Leigh Teabing becomes their accomplice as they run from the law, and search for the famous Holy Grail, though Dan Brown re-interprets what that chalice really means. There is an albino murderer named Silas, and a few other characters, but the story mainly involves those three, Sophie, Robert and Mr. Teabing.

A conversation between Sophie and Robert introduces us to the subject/issue for today. Here are two quotes:

Langdon smiled. “Sophie, *every* faith in the world is based on fabrication. That is the definition of *faith* – acceptance of that which we imagine to be true, that which we cannot prove. Every religion describes God through metaphor, allegory, and exaggeration, from the early Egyptians through modern Sunday School. Metaphors are a way to help our minds process the unprocessable. The problems arise when we begin to believe literally in our own metaphors.” (page 341-342 *The DaVinci Code*, by Dan Brown) And here is another: ‘History is always written by the winners. When two cultures clash, the loser is obliterated, and the winner writes the history books – books which glorify their own cause and disparage the conquered foe. As Napoleon once said, ‘What is history, but a fable agreed upon?’ (256)

Here are the real facts, my friends! The Christian faith is based on historically verifiable facts, it is not just an exaggerated fabrication of metaphors, allegory and fanciful fiction; espoused by some misguided apostles, and codified some 300 years later by a devious Constantine. Abraham was a real person; Israel was taken captive by Egypt, at a specific place and time, and later rescued through the Exodus, with a guy named Moses at the helm. King David was a real king, Esther a real queen. Their names are recorded in history books, they are not fictitious characters inserted in a novel to spice up the story. The prophets were actual people, and even Mary, Joseph, Elizabeth and Zechariah existed. Jesus may have come to the world in an unusual way, but there is ample historical evidence that he lived in Palestine, Galilee and even Egypt during the first century. The Christian faith is based on historical fact; and whether we choose to believe in those facts or not; does not change them.

Many people observing an accident might recount what they saw of the accident from their perspective, but all those different perspectives don't change the fact that there was an accident! Dan Brown's blanket statement that all faith is nothing more than mere fabrication is just not true. That is no problem for intelligent, faith filled people to decipher, but for the unsuspecting reader who doesn't know these facts, it can be dangerous.

The Christian faith has always been held in suspended scrutiny by those who have difficulty accepting its core dogma; that Christ died to save sinners, and we are all sinners. But it has come under microscopic scrutiny in recent years, as our 'new age', 'all truth is relative', 'exalted personal experience', culture and society explore modern ways to undo, discredit, deny, and disregard what for centuries has been the human problem with the divine intervention in our world, and our history.

Our faith, the Christian faith is not just a collection of silly stories, and lengthy legends, and mysterious myths, and fanciful farces; it is not just a story...it is history...it is His Story...the story of God loving a lost and dying world, and choosing (repeatedly) to intervene in our 'history'; ultimately sending His very own Son, to live, and die, and come back to life, so that whosoever might believe in Jesus, would not die, but have eternal life. That is our story, that is our history, that is our Faith, and that my friends is a fact!

Who are we to believe? Dan Brown, through his characters, discounts the Bible with one sweep of his pen. He says that winners write history, implying that since Christians were the winners in the power struggle during the time of Constantine, they were able to rewrite history to their advantage. They staged 'a fable agreed upon.' The fable? That Jesus was a divine being who, after dying, rose from the dead. This, according to Teabing and Langdon, is not provable, so it must be a falsehood written by 'winners'.

What's interesting to me though, is that throughout the time the gospels and other NT books were being written, (50-90AD), Christians were a minority, persecuted by both Jews and Romans. They could not, in any way, be considered 'winners' when these books were written. They were killed for maintaining their faith when a simple verbal rejection of Jesus would have saved them from a cruel death. These are the ones Brown considers 'winners'?

And furthermore, if the Christian faith is based on actual verifiable and historic facts, which of those facts do you think is the most important? Yes, the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Adam and Eve are important, the incarnation and virgin birth are important, but one event in the whole long Judeo-Christian history books serves as the Keystone event, the line in the sand argument, the deciding factor to determine if this Christian faith is true, or a fabricated myth, and that event is the bodily, physical Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. It is a fact, not just a faith statement, certainly not a fictitious fable.

At Bible Study last Wed. we tried to re-create a 'mock' Nicene Council and tried to determine what criteria we would use to justify which of the books or 'gospels' should be included in the official list called the Bible. We decided that one criterion outweighed all the rest; can you guess what it was? Yes, being an eyewitness of the actual events was deemed the strongest case for accepting a writing into the Bible. Thus, those books that were written by an actual eyewitness, or where recorded from the sermons or stories from actual eyewitnesses would carry more weight than some written years later, by others who were not present with Jesus. That makes this text, most revealing. IF the Resurrection is the cornerstone event upon which all of the Christian faith stands or falls, and if eyewitness accounts are the most reliable to verify an event then listen to this:

“I passed on to you what was most important and what had also been passed on to me. Christ died for our sins, just as the Scriptures said. He was buried, and he was raised from the dead on the third day, just as the Scriptures said. He was seen by Peter, and then by the twelve. After that, he was seen by more than 500 of his followers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he was seen by James and later by all the apostles. Last of all, as though I had been born at the wrong time, I also saw him.” 1 Corinthians 15: 3-8

Over 500 hundred eyewitnesses at one time and many others at different times and different places...It would be hard to get 500 + people to corroborate a fabricated story, and get it so precisely correct wouldn't you say? It would be easier (at least for most) to agree that it must have happened as it was reported. Let's consider in closing what actually was recorded, and what it means for us today.

1. CHRIST DIED FOR OUR SINS...JUST AS THE SCRIPTURES SAID HE WOULD.

I'm not so sure the problem we have with this fact today is more related to the later rather than the former fact. We have a hard time accepting the fact we are sinners, and we have a hard time accepting the fact that God would actually, factually, historically become a real live, flesh and blood human being, for no greater purpose than to save us from our sins. It is not so much that we can't fathom that kind of love, but that we have a hard time admitting that we need to be saved. That is also a fact my friends!

2. CHRIST WAS DEAD AND BURIED...JUST AS THE SCRIPTURES SAID WOULD HAPPEN.

Christ wasn't just buried, in some pain induced stupor, later to be revived and roll away a huge stone in his weakened condition. No, it is a matter of historical record, verified by over 500 witnesses; 3 days dead, 3 days incased in a sealed lifeless tomb. The tomb still exists; you can visit it today, and see for yourself, it's still empty!

3. CHRIST WAS RAISED FROM THE DEAD...JUST AS THE SCRIPTURES SAID WOULD HAPPEN.

Did you know that there are more actual physical, historical records in museums and libraries around the world for just the Resurrection of Jesus, than there is for the entire life and death of Julius Caesar? No one questions that Caesar lived, yet many question the fact of Jesus' life!

4. CHRIST APPEARED TO MANY AFTER HIS RESURRECTION...JUST AS JESUS SAID HE WOULD.

Our little mock Nicene tribunal probably shouldn't be trusted to determine what criteria should be used to justify which books make the "Bible Cut", but interestingly enough, that is exactly the same criteria those gathered in Nicea did use!

Also interesting to note that the oldest New Testament documents we have in our modern Bibles are not the gospels, not the letters of Peter and John, but the letters of Paul, and most scholars agree that one of the oldest, one of the originals was the source of today's text, I Corinthians. These verses may well have been an affirmation of faith of the earliest followers of Jesus, used in worship during the earliest days following his death, resurrection and return to heaven. Paul recorded for all posterity that this faith, this Christian faith is not based on speculative fabrication, but certain facts, not the least of which are that Jesus was dead and buried and resurrected from his death tomb, to save us all from our sins. That is the fact upon which the entire Christian faith hangs. That is the fact upon which the entire Christian faith is built. That is the fact upon which must decide today. That is the fact; and choosing to accept or reject it will not change it, but it will forever change YOU. What will you do with this fact?

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2. CHRIST WAS _____ AND _____...JUST AS THE SCRIPTURES SAID WOULD HAPPEN.

3. CHRIST WAS _____ FROM THE _____...JUST AS THE SCRIPTURES SAID WOULD HAPPEN.

4. CHRIST _____ TO MANY _____ HIS RESURRECTION...JUST AS JESUS SAID HE WOULD.