



LUTHERAN
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

By Pastor Merv Thompson

Pastor's Update

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"May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." (2 Cor. 13:14).

Some weeks ago my wife Jackie and I retreated to a quiet place where, "Cheers" theme song, "no one knows your name or is glad you came." Long walks among the abundant Northwest Arkansas hills coupled with sampling a wide variety of cuisines at local eateries were highlights. But we have also discovered that no sojourn is truly complete without mandatory visits to the various bookstores in the area, always searching for the next great American novel.

What we did not know but quickly realized was that author Dan Brown must have orchestrated a takeover of the local Barnes and Noble, given the way his best-seller, the controversial "Da Vinci Code" dominated every conceivable display counter and cupboard. And so we, like millions of others, made our way to the credit card register with the aforementioned book in tow, hoping for scintillating reading. I can't remember what was more disappointing that weekend, Brown's book or the Minnesota Vikings losing to the worst team in football at the time, San Diego.

For the seeming minority who have not read the book, a short introduction is in order. "The Da Vinci Code" is fiction, we must always keep this in mind, the creation of a facile and creative mind. While the author introduces many items that appear to be facts, when examined more closely they also turn out to be fiction. It is above all a novel, a fast paced romantic whodunit that captures your fancy.

When we read this particular book of fiction, we must keep in mind the image Pastor Mike painted some weeks ago. All of us repeated with him as he held up the Bible, "this is the Bible" and when he held up "Da Vinci Code", "this is not the Bible. As a novel of fiction, the book is enjoyable, as an interpretation of history or theology, it is seriously wanting.

The novel begins with a modern-day murder of an elderly curator at the Louvre in Paris. We soon discover that this curator is a member of the Priory of Sion, (a secret society whose members included Leonardo da Vinci) and that he was harboring a secret that will, if released, shake the foundations of Christianity. In his death the curator leaves a series of complex and complicated clues, magically deciphered by only two people on earth who understood such mysteries; the curator's granddaughter, a French cryptologist, and Robert Langdon, a Harvard professor deep into "symbolology." The two set out on a 24-hour speed hunt, dogged by the French police and a homicidal albino "monk" working for Opus Dei (an actual Catholic sect, whose members practice self-flagellation).

The ultimate goal of the two principals, who are moving toward the obligatory romantic engagement, is to find the Holy Grail, the same cup used at the Last Supper. Various periods of history and different authors have revisited this search. But Brown turns this search on its head by claiming that the Holy Grail is not a drinking vessel at all, but rather it is a woman, and her name is Mary Magdalene. He goes on to make the historically and biblically indefensible claim that Mary was married to Jesus and gave birth to his children. For the past two thousand years the Catholic Church has been covering up the truth of this marriage.

He also asserts that the famous painting of the Last Supper by Da Vinci really is full of symbolism that had been hidden from the world until now. Da Vinci was so devious that he substituted the figure of the disciple John for that of Mary Magdalene, which was a message for all of the people in this secret society. As one art historian is quoted in Time Magazine, "this assertion runs contrary to all textual accounts of Christ's Passover Meal with his disciples." No Kidding! But then he says very

emphatically, "If people make little mistakes, they are likely to make big mistakes." A very good summary of the book.

Why has the book had such a huge response? Several reasons appear to be given:

- ◆ We live in a period where there is enormous interest in spiritual matters. Brown understands this and exploits it in the novel.
- ◆ People have a heightened interest in Jesus. In fact Stephen Prothero of Boston University makes this statement, "One way you figure out your place in America is figuring out what you think about Jesus."
- ◆ Everyone loves a conspiracy. A nation that was transformed by Watergate and all of the other "gates" is always ripe for another conspiracy. When Brown suggests a massive cover-up by the Catholic Church, people become passionate about getting to the bottom of this newest and perhaps oldest of conspiracies.
- ◆ Symbolism or "symbology" has something for everyone. One expert writes, "Brown is as gleeful as a kid with a new decoder ring, toying with puzzles, anagrams, pictograms, encryptions, and mathematical twisters. In his kind of symbolic world, paintings, building and even Walt Disney films are rich with symbology.
- ◆ Brown is also riding the wave of revulsion in the corruption in the Roman Catholic Church, marked most recently by the sex-abuse scandals. It only follows that if a church will cover up the behavior of sexually predator priests, it would not hesitate to do the same thing of a sexual scandal in the first century.
- ◆ Finally Brown grabs onto a tendency in this culture to denigrate and ridicule Christianity and Christians. If he would have trashed Jews, he would have been accused of being anti-Semitic. If he would have disparaged Islam, he would have been seen as bigoted or racist, or perhaps as has also been the case, targeted for death. But Christianity always seems to be fair game.

As one critic writes, "blasphemy is delivered in a soft voice and a knowing chuckle," "every faith in the world is based on fabrication.'

Most theologians and scholars who have looked at the book take Brown to task for using highly unreliable sources. Historians are puzzled why he relied so heavily on the Gnostic Gospels, writings which were rejected by the early church. Gnosticism was a philosophy in the second and third century that denigrated the work of Christ, believing the way to salvation was through knowledge (gnosis). It also centered on a dualistic world, God's creation was evil, including humankind. But God placed a divine spark within each person, and it lived in this evil receptor until it could return from whence it came. The early church had little problem rejecting this teaching.

For more information, I would recommend going to www.beliefnet.com and finding an article by Sandra Miesel. Hopefully in the near future some Lutheran theologians will begin to spell out the gross inadequacies of the novel. But just remember, this is fiction. Nothing more. Enjoy it as a murder mystery, but put no more credence in it pronouncements.