



LUTHERAN
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

By Pastor Merv Thompson

Pastor's Update

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"Rejoice in the Lord always, I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." (Philippians 4:4-5).

Some months ago I wrote a piece on The Da Vinci Code, the best selling book by Dan Brown. I thought that might be all that we needed to say on the subject, but, alas, the book is still topping the charts. Testimony to the continuing impact of the book is the fact that both the more liberal Christian Century and the more conservative Christianity Today magazines had recent cover stories on this subject. I would like to condense and paraphrase parts of both articles.

First of all, the article in the Century is written by Mark Burrows, a Professor of Christian History at Andover Newton Theological School in Massachusetts. He is not at all hesitant to let us know what he thinks of the book:

"Brown's novel is a conspiracy tract set in a fictional frame. The conspiracy theory is built on an unorthodox account of Christian history advanced in the early 1980's by a book entitled Holy Blood, Holy Grail. Even though the documents upon which this book were ultimately exposed as a hoax, Brown still takes the conclusions seriously.

While The Da Vinci Code is clearly fiction, Brown for some reason or another thinks he is making a serious contribution to a revisionist history of early and medieval Christianity. Regrettably, many of his readers also take him at his word. Basically the novel has something for almost everyone who is unhappy with the church today, especially the Roman Catholic Church, and it trades on the spiritual hunger prevalent today.

The novel, says Burrows, is "full of slipshod scholarship and mixes occasional facts with a large measure of fantasy. Serious muddle is found in his attempt to narrate Christian origins." For instance, Brown contends that Constantine is responsible for much theological mischief. He claims that for the first three centuries that Christians viewed Jesus

primarily as a prophet, as a great and powerful man, but not God.

Burrows comments that this conclusion would have greatly surprised the Apostle Paul, and most of the theologians whose words defined Christian orthodoxy before the pivotal Council of Nicea in 325. All of these, according to Burrows, shared a strong belief in the divinity of Jesus.

Brown says that Constantine upgraded Jesus' status to divine for political reasons. He also claims that many scholars claim that the early church stole Jesus from his original followers. Burrows asks, "Who were these followers who were only interested in Jesus the man, the great prophet?" Brown doesn't say and the historical evidence for such a claim is nonexistent.

The most bizarre claim of Brown's, says Burrows, is his assertion that the earthly aspects of Jesus' life had to be omitted from the Bible. What aspects would these be; his teaching, his acts of compassion toward the sick, his care for his followers? One can only conclude that Brown has not bothered to read Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, since these canonical Gospels are persistently and profoundly interested in earthly details.

Another embarrassing section of the book is the claim that the Gnostic Gospels were excluded from the final Bible because they spoke of Jesus in very human terms. In fact, Gnostic writings favor an extreme dualism (spirit good, body evil), which offers little consolation for those hoping to celebrate the sexual passion which is so much on Brown's mind.

Also in the category of the absurd is Brown's assertion that references to the marriage of Mary Magdalene and Jesus keep reoccurring in the Gospels. Exactly what Gospels Brown is referring to is

unclear. When he says this is a matter of historical record and that even Leonardo Da Vinci was aware of this fact, one can only wonder what record he refers to.

So the critique goes. Burrows pretty much dismisses almost everything in the book from a historical or biblical point of view. For his entire article look at www.christiancentury.org.

Christianity Today features an article by Ben Witherton III, who is a Professor of New Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary in Kentucky. His new book, The Gospel Code, will be out in July.

Witherton similarly examines the issue of Constantine and whether he changed the emphasis concerning Jesus from that of being just human to that of being divine. He quotes Brown as saying that "Constantine commissioned and financed a new Bible, which omitted these gospels that spoke of Christ's human traits and embellished those gospels which made him godlike. He claims that earlier gospels were burned."

Much of Brown's "so-called evidence" seemingly comes from a book by Elaine Pagels, a Professor of the history of religions at Princeton University. In her book, The Gnostic Gospels, Pagels basically challenges the authority of the New Testament, which Witherton agrees is the core issue. Is the New Testament authoritative?

Witherton also reviews Brown's use of Gnostic literature. Gnosticism, as we remember, is very different from Christian teaching. Where Judaism and Christianity emphasize the role of faith and works in salvation, Gnostics taught that the sole salvation depended upon certain individuals possessing quasi-intuitive knowledge (gnosis) of the mysteries of the universe and of magic formulas.

Witherton also asks whether or not there was such a thing as orthodoxy before the Fourth Century? He claims that there is no strong evidence that Gnostic teaching was competing with orthodoxy for the hearts and minds of believers in the early days. Even the Gospel of Thomas, among the first and certainly the most famous Gnostic Gospel, comes

from a period of history long after the New Testament books were written. All other Gnostic Gospels are still later than this.

When Pagels insists that there was no core belief system in the first century, she ignores the most famous of them all, the Gospel of John (come and join this study at worship this summer). Also Paul's letters show strong distinctions made between truth and error right from the beginning. And by the time we get to the Pastoral Epistles, there is a very strong sense of what is and what is not sound doctrine, particularly in terms of salvation and the person of Jesus Christ.

Witherton also highlights another basic difference between Gnosticism and Christianity. Christians right from the beginning regarded the Old Testament as authoritative and divinely inspired. We all know that the Old Testament is quoted often in the New. But Gnosticism rejected Jewish theology about the goodness of creation and that all nations could be blessed through Abraham and the covenant. When the early church accepted the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, it basically rejected Gnosticism before it had any chance even to get started.

The full article can be found at www.christiancentury.com.

By the way, our daughter Deanna, who is a Professor of Religion at Hamline University in St. Paul, Mn., is teaching a class this fall to students on The Da Vinci Code. She will be spending the summer putting the materials together. Of course I gave her both of the articles mentioned above. This suggests a continuing interest in the book and the issues which it raised.