

The Da Vinci Code: What Does Christianity Really Teach?

Are Women Valued in Christianity?

For one month we have been responding to allegations raised about Christianity by the book, *The Da Vinci Code*. Research and scholarship has answered questions, “Did the Church Re-Write History?” No. “Can the Bible be trusted?” Yes. “Was Jesus Just a Man?” No, he was also God. And today the question we deal with is “Are Women Valued in Christianity?”

Today, however, I am not going to devote much time or detail in describing the false statements made in Dan Brown’s book and, no doubt, in the movie that debuts this Friday.

If you want more documented detail about the errors, assumptions, and falsehoods of the book, there are several great resources for you or your friends to use. David Stevens and I have read through most of these in preparation of this series and they are available for you to borrow if you want more scholarly documentation:

- *Breaking the Da Vinci Code*, by Darrell Bock, PhD
- *Exploring the Da Vinci Code*, by Lee Strobel and Garry Poole
- *The Truth Behind the Da Vinci Code*, by Richard Abanes
- *Cracking Da Vinci’s Code*, by James Garlow and Peter Jones
- *The Real History behind the Da Vinci Code*, by Sharan Newman
- *The Da Vinci Code Personal Unedited Research*, by Josh McDowell

There are two other resources we have made available this whole month which are again available for you in the foyer after the service. Both of these resources would be excellent to give to a friend.

- *The Da Vinci Code, A Companion Guide to the Movie*, is free for you to share with friends.
- *A Quest for Answers*, by Josh McDowell, is for sale for \$2. It weaves answers into a fictional dialogue among three college-aged students.

So today I won’t quote from *The Da Vinci Code*, but let me summarize in a nut shell what *The Da Vinci Code* says about women and Christianity. It proposes that paganism exalted women, but Christianity put women down. It asserts that Mary Magdalene was married to Jesus, and that she bore him a daughter named Sarah. But the Church, because of power-hungry men like Peter, banished Mary Magdalene, tarnishing her reputation, calling her a prostitute.

Mary Magdalene was a real person. But there is no historical basis—hear it again—no historical basis for the fanciful theory that she was married to Jesus, or bore him a child.

Mary Magdalene does enter the biblical narrative, being mentioned in all four of the Gospels. On this Mother's Day, we will have a biblical, biographical sermon about Mary Magdalene. In doing so, we will answer the larger question, Are Women Valued in Christianity?

Mary Magdalene first enters the Gospel story in Luke 8:1-3

After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Cuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means.

So Luke 8 introduces us to this woman, known to us as Mary Magdalene. She was from the town of Magdala, situated along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Magdala was an important agricultural, fishing and trade center at the junction of the two roads. The town's name is derived from the Hebrew *migdal* (mig-dawl'), meaning "tower," suggesting it was the site of a guard tower overlooking the important route. In the same manner as Jesus was identified as a Nazarene ("Jesus, of Nazareth"), Mary became identified as being from Magdala ("Mary the Magdalene").

Through this mention of Christ curing her of evil spirits, having expelled seven demons from her, we are reminded of this truth:

**Christ valued women and ministered to their needs.
(Luke 8:1-2)**

Mary Magdalene is one of many women specifically mentioned in the Gospel narrative as receiving priority in the compassionate ministry of Jesus Christ.

As Jesus approached the city of Nain, he met the funeral procession of a widow's only son. The text says he felt compassion for her—he knew what a hard life it was for a woman of the first century, especially if they had lost their husband. And then to have the grief and tragedy in this woman's life compounded by the death of her son—her only son. Touched by the desolate state of the widow, Jesus halts the processional. "Do not weep," he says to the woman. And, touching the coffin he said, "Young man, I say to you arise!" And the dead man sat up and began to speak. And Jesus gave him back to his mother. Astonishment and gratitude gripped the whole town. (Luke 7:11-17)

Another instance of Jesus' ministering to the specific need of a woman is described in Mark 5 and Luke 8:43ff. A woman had been suffering with an "issue of blood" (perhaps a sensitive reference to a gynecological problem) for 12 years. During that time she had "endured much at the hands of many physicians" and, though she had spent all her

money, she had not improved but, actually, became worse. Being a woman in her culture, she did not feel significant enough to request directly the assistance and attention of this important person, Jesus the Nazarene. But she believed in him. She believed he could heal her. Finally, she decided to approach as part of the crowd around him and touch his robe, thinking, "If I just touch His garments, I shall get well." Jesus knew all of this, of course. He was aware of her and her history, and knew she was snaking her way toward him through the press of people. When she reached out her hand in faith, he did heal her. Immediately the flow of her blood was dried up and she felt in her body that she was healed. But Jesus doesn't like anonymous discipleship. He never has. He called Zacheus out of a tree, and here he wants to call this woman out of a crowd. So he says something to his disciples that they think is ridiculous. Jesus asked, "Who touched my garments?" "Lord," they replied, "You're in a mosh pit of people. How is it that you ask, 'Who touched me?'" But the woman knew what he was referring to. The woman fearing and trembling fell down before Jesus and told Him the whole truth. "Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace, and be healed of your affliction."

Women, whether your need is for physical healing or emotional comfort, whether it is for forgiveness and peace, you will find Christ as responsive to your need as a woman as he is to men and their needs. Women are valued by Christ and by Christianity.

The second piece of information we see from this introductory paragraph about Mary Magdalene is that she, and the other women, helped to support Jesus out of their means. Some of the male disciples quit their jobs and followed along with Jesus. Some of the female disciples kept their jobs and contributed their offerings.

From this we see a second truth about Christ's attitude toward women:

**Christ valued women and received ministry from them.
(Luke 8:3)**

It is usually harder on my pride to receive than to give. But Jesus valued women enough to receive from them! In Luke 8 he receives financial support. In John 4, he requests a drink of water from a Samaritan woman. In doing so, he demonstrated he needed them just as they had needed him.

Christianity also values women and has received ministry from them. In Romans 16 Paul commends 27 leaders, of whom 7 are definitely women's names. This includes Phoebe, a deacon and Junia, a small 'a' apostle.

Today women serve Christ in many ways. As an evangelical church, we recognize there are verses in the Bible that restrict the role of women within the church. What those restrictions are, and how they are to be applied is a subject of much debate. There are obviously areas with a green light, clearly permitted. There are areas of red lights, clearly restricted. But in between there is, frankly, quite a bit of gray. In those areas of gray, of

course we do not want to violate Scripture by allowing something God has prohibited. But we church leaders should also greatly fear putting up a barrier, a restriction where none exists. It would be a tragic loss to God's Kingdom to prohibit the service of a gifted, equipped, willing woman from a ministry if God had granted permission and given his call.

When we look at the ministry of Jesus and his attitude toward women, when we see the practice of the Early Church in the Book of Acts, we see women are to be valued as they willingly give their service to Christ.

**Christ valued women and was attended by them during his death.
(Matthew 27:55-61)**

The next time Mary enters the Gospel narrative is at the end of Jesus' life. Let's look at Matthew 27:55-61.

Many women were there, watching (the crucifixion) from a distance. They had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee's sons.

As evening approached, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who had himself become a disciple of Jesus. Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body, and Pilate ordered that it be given to him. Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock. He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb.

Though most of the men fled when Jesus was arrested, tried, and crucified, Mary Magdalene stayed to persevere to the end. She showed feminine sensitivity to his needs when she chose not to desert him as he hung on the cross in shame and pain. Even though she could do nothing to prevent the injustice, alleviate the pain, or deflect the insults, she was there anyway. Perhaps, by just being present she encouraged Jesus that all had not fled, betrayed, denied. And, after he died, she along with the other Mary (the mother of James and Joses) and Joseph of Arimathea honored the body in its burial.

Are Women Valued in Christianity? How many times and in how many ways have women's sensitivity ministered to the needs of those in times of pain and loss. Some of the most effective counselors are women. Some of the best medical missionaries are women. Some of the most effective chaplains are women. Why? Because, like Mary Magdalene, they do not turn away when confronted with other people's pain—emotional or physical—and trauma. Women are often sensitive in ways men can only aspire to be.

**Christ valued women and demonstrated it after his resurrection.
(John 20:1-18)**

Out of all the possible scenarios that God could have orchestrated to divulge the most important event in human history, the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, he chose to reveal the truth first to a woman, Mary Magdalene. Let's read the account from John 20:1-18.

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"

The reference to "the disciple whom Jesus loved" is how the writer of this book, John the Disciple, referred to himself. In humility, throughout the Gospel of John, he refers to himself only as "the other disciple" or "the disciple that Jesus loved."

So Peter and the other disciple [that would be John] started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first

We don't know much about the physical characteristics of the Disciples. We don't know who was young and who was old. Who was fat and who was slim. Who was bearded and who was not. About the only thing we know about the disciples physically is revealed here. In a long-distance sprint, John was fitter than Peter.

He [John] bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb.

Of course Peter would go right on it. Peter was always the disciple who blustered forward. He was the one who would jump out of a boat to walk on water if Jesus invited him. He was the one who would take out his sword and lop off the ear of Malchus if Jesus seemed to need his defense. Here he thinks nothing about pushing forward into a tomb.

He [Peter] saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple [John], who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed.

But what did he 'believe'? Some might think they believed the resurrection had happened at that point. I don't think that is what it means. They did not yet believe in the resurrection yet. What they believed is that Mary Magdalene's assumption of verse 2 was right: 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!' Why do I say that? Well, first, because of the parenthetical phrase that

immediately follows. As you know, parenthetical sentences are used to explain what just was written. Here, the parenthetical explanation says this:

They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.

The second reason I believe they thought the body had been taken away was what happened next.

Then the disciples went back to their homes,...

If they had believed in the resurrection at that point, they would have gathered a group of disciples together and had a praise session, not just go home. The third reason I think they still believed the body was taken somewhere else is that they left Mary Magdalene in the midst of her sorrow.

...but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

"Woman," he said, "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher).

At this point, Mary Magdalene grabs and holds onto Jesus' feet.

Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.

Amazing. Out of all the disciples Jesus could have first appeared to in his resurrected, visible body, he chose to appear first to Mary Magdalene, a woman!

Amazing, out of all the people Jesus could have chosen to proclaim the original Good News, “I have seen the Lord!,” Jesus chose Mary Magdalene, a woman.

It is clear that Jesus valued women, esteeming them as equal to men. But how about the Church? What does Christianity believe?

**Christ valued women and proclaimed their equality through the Apostle Paul.
(Galatians 3:28)**

The Apostle Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, writing in AD 49 says this in Galatians 3:28.

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man; there is neither male or female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

You are all one in Christ Jesus. Whether Jew or Greek—regardless of your racial heritage. Whether slave or free—regardless of your economic station. Whether male or female—regardless of your gender. You are all equal before God and united in Christ Jesus. In the church we are all equal at the foot of the cross.

This is the bedrock belief of Christianity and has formed the basis the humanitarian expression of God’s love through the church through the centuries to people regardless of their race, status, or gender.

This stands in contrast to the Judaism Paul was familiar with, including the Talmudic morning blessing men prayed, *“Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who hast not made me a Gentile, a slave or a woman.”*

This stands in contrast to the Gnostic Gospels of which Dan Brown is so fond. The Gospel of Thomas, being written in the 2nd century, was not actually written by the disciple Thomas. I suppose its author thought, “What should I call my collection of 114 sayings of Jesus? If I call it after my own name, ‘The Gospel of Fred’ not many will read it. I know. I’ll make it a Pseudepigraphal book. I’ll call it ‘The Gospel of Thomas’ (since the names of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John have already been taken).” It is this collection of sayings called *The Gospel of Thomas* that Brown cites as evidence that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married. The book concludes with this eye-popping statement about women: *“Let Mary go away from us, because women are not worthy of life.”* Then Jesus allegedly tells Peter, *“I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.”*

The Gnostic Gospels would not be the favorite literature of Gloria Steinem and other feminists. Neither should the Gnostic Gospel heresies be put forth as legitimate expressions of Christianity. They were heretical in the second and third centuries. They still are. Among their many errors is their devaluing of women.

On this Mother's Day 2006, if Mary from Magdala stood before us what would she say? If Mary were here today, she would want to introduce you to the Savior who took the broken pieces of her life and made her new. She would testify about His acceptance of her as a woman, as a sinner. She would tell you he's an "Equal Opportunity Savior." She would tell us how valued she felt by Jesus because he found her worthy of being helped and esteemed in being able to serve. She would also describe the execution she witnessed—the death she now knows was necessary for our forgiveness when "He who knew no sin became sin on our behalf, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him." (2 Corinthians 5:21). And yes, Mary Magdalene would be excited to tell you her eye-witness account of the empty tomb and interaction with the Christ in his new resurrected body.

Mary Magdalene would ask you, "Do you want Jesus to do for you what he did for me? To put the pieces of your life back together? To forgive your sins and to give you a purpose to live?"

And, on this Mother's Day 2006, Mary from Magdala would probably also say, "Hey, let me answer that question of the week from *The Da Vinci Code*: 'Are women valued in Christianity?'" Based upon my interaction with Christ himself, my answer is "Absolutely! Absolutely, yes!"