

# Christians counter The Da Vinci Code: An opportunity to debate church history

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As *The Da Vinci Code*, the fast-paced thriller by novelist Dan Brown, marks nearly a year atop the *New York Times* best-seller list, critics have staged a counteroffensive.

Christians from a variety of church circles have been disconcerted by the book's claims that Jesus married Mary Magdalene and fathered a child, and that the Bible was commissioned and manipulated by the Roman emperor Constantine for political purposes.

In one sense, the effort is the flip side of the evangelizing coin for conservative evangelicals in the winter of 2003-2004. The other side is Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ*, which premiered on Ash Wednesday amid promotions by leading evangelical pastors and organizations. While mainline and Catholic church bodies issued cautionary guidelines regarding the film's graphic violence and harsh portrayal of Jewish persecutors, most evangelical leaders welcomed the movie as a conversion tool.

The ongoing fascination with Brown's mystery novel—filled with codes ranging from numerical puzzles and poetic riddles to hidden messages —has resulted in more than 6 million copies sold. The book has been translated into more than three dozen languages, and is set for a film version directed by Ron Howard for Columbia Pictures.

ABC-TV did an hour-long special on *Jesus, Mary and Da Vinci* that balanced the book's claims and speculations with opposing opinions by church figures and scholars. On that program, Karen King of Harvard Divinity School, who has two books out on Mary Magdalene, said that even if it is theoretically possible that Jesus married (Gospel accounts are silent on that point), no evidence exists in biblical or apocryphal works of that period that he was married to Mary of Magdala.

Theological conservatives see the book's popularity as an opportunity to sell rebutting books and engage in debates on church history with people who might have avoided such discussions before.

Mark O'Keefe, writing for Religion News Service, noted recently that books and articles with titles like *Dismantling the Da Vinci Code* and *The Da Vinci Deception* have been or are about to be published. Preachers are giving sermons in response to church members who ask why they were never told there was a Mrs. Jesus. Web sites and discussion groups are buzzing over the book's "heresies."

In the *Catholic New World*, the newspaper of the archdiocese of Chicago, Cardinal Francis George calls the book "a work of bizarre religious imaginings" based on "a facade of scholarship" that exploits the public's "gullibility for conspiracy."

A California pastor sees only limited harm. "It's only a threat if people read this fictional book naïvely, don't think critically about it and don't pursue truth," said Mark Roberts, pastor of Irvine Presbyterian Church in Irvine. "Now that we have people thinking and talking, we can look at the real evidence of Jesus."

Many traditional believers, however, are protesting the book's negative portrayal of central Christian beliefs, and its assertion that Constantine collated the Bible, omitting some 80 gospels allegedly emphasizing Jesus' human traits in favor of four that made him God. (In fact, many apocryphal texts discovered at Nag Hammadi, Egypt, in 1945 tend to emphasize Jesus' supernatural nature.)

The supposed censorship took place, according to the novel, in 325 AD at the Council of Nicea, "in a relatively close vote." But the actual vote was 300-2, said Paul Maier, professor of ancient history at Western Michigan University, and it did not determine Jesus' divinity. That was attested to much earlier "by many New Testament passages, as well as by the earliest Christians and all the church fathers, even if there was some disagreement as to the precise nature of that deity," Maier said. The Council of Nicea "did not debate over whether Jesus was only mortal or divine, but whether he was created or eternal."

Peter Jones, coauthor of the forthcoming *Cracking the Da Vinci Code*, says that in trying to establish that the Bible was cooked by Constantine and his cronies, Brown overlooks the fact that four-fifths of what is now called the New Testament was deemed divinely inspired by the end of the first century—well before Constantine and the Council of Nicea.