

Brief Note

Reflections on *The Da Vinci Code*

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Almost 100 years ago the church historian Philip Schaff wrote, "All turns at last on the answer to that fundamental question, 'What think ye of Christ?' The true solution of this question is the radical refutation of every error."¹ This is a principle we can apply to Dan Brown's novel, *The Da Vinci Code*.² Let me explain what I mean.

Brown claims in his book that Jesus was not divine, but was merely a man like any other. The documents the church accepted as inspired say one thing (that Jesus was divine), while other documents that the church suppressed say another (that He was nothing more than a man). Brown suggests that the documents we have are wrong, whereas the ones the church suppressed are right. So that's one claim, i.e., that Jesus is not divine. Another is that Jesus had children by Mary Magdalene and that their line survives to this day among the elite of Europe. These claims are true, or they are not.

If Jesus was merely a man, and not divine, then - assuming He had children - why would they be any more special than you or me? If He was not divine, neither were they.³ Or is the author saying that Jesus had no special qualities but His purported children do? If He had children, and if there was nothing extraordinary about them, then why write a book to say so? Alternatively, why write a book saying that they did have special qualities if they did not? So that's one set of problems.

On the other hand, if Jesus was indeed divine – the Son of God, as He claims to be in the Bible – then all those Gnostic gospels that Brown appeals to are wrong and this part of his documentary base crumbles.

So which way shall we have it? Some of the details Brown puts forward are admittedly told in such a way as to make an interesting story, but the two claims we are talking about here are mutually exclusive.

If Jesus was not divine and had children under the conditions Brown suggests, there would be nothing remarkable about them and he would have no reason to write his book. If on the other hand Jesus was (and is) divine, contrary to Brown's claim, then no part of the case he builds from the evidence of hidden Gnostic gospels is true and we would have no reason to read his book.

Before leaving this topic let me just say a word about the Gnostic gospels themselves. What sorts of things do they say? First, Brown is wrong when he suggests that Constantine at the Council of Nicea suppressed these unwelcome gospels. It is true

¹ *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910), 1:567.

² New York: Doubleday, 2003.

³ Hat's off to a friend of mine, Bill Onuska, for pointing out this egregious inconsistency to me in a conversation over lunch one day.

that Nicea discussed the nature of Christ, but there was no discussion about what books to include in the Bible. This is the smaller of two errors. I say this because, even if Constantine did not suppress the Gnostic gospels, someone did. So at least Brown is right in saying that over time they were suppressed. He's merely wrong about who did the suppressing. This is a relatively small error. In regard to what the Gnostics believed about Jesus, however, Brown is off by 180 degrees.

Instead of emphasizing what made Jesus human, the Gnostics emphasized what made Him divine - or spiritual, or mystical, or anything other than physical. The reason for this is that Gnostics thought matter was evil. So if Jesus was good, He could not have had a real body like we do. Brown has Gnostics saying just the opposite, i.e., that He might have appeared to be divine, but was not. The actual fact is that what the Gnostics denied was Christ's humanity, not His divinity. At this point in an otherwise carefully researched novel, Brown has the facts precisely backwards. This is a crucial mistake which undermines the entire fabric of his plot.

Instead of hurrying on past this point, let me quote a passage from 1 John 4, where John is trying to correct a problem in the early church. Commentators agree that he's arguing against the Gnostic position. Here's what he says:

This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world. (1 John 4:2-3, NIV)

Gnostics did not want Jesus to be fully human; Brown does not want Jesus to be fully divine. The two are saying completely and totally different things. And that's fine. There's enough room in the world for a lot of disagreement. But appealing for support to a source that fundamentally refutes one's claims does not make for a strong argument. The plot of Brown's book might be entertaining, but this part of his research is misconceived at the outset and just plain wrong.