

Slavery, William Wilberforce and the Film “Amazing Grace”

The transatlantic trade in slavery was outlawed 200 years ago. This anniversary is marked by the release of Amazing Grace,em> a feature film about abolitionist William Wilberforce. Byron Barlowe argues that his life is an exemplar of how God can use faith, moral bravery along with biblical thinking and long-term action—even against tough odds—to transform culture for good.

You may have caught the buzz surrounding the film *Amazing Grace*, still in theaters nationwide at this writing. It premiered just in time to celebrate the anti-slavery campaign led by William Wilberforce, which outlawed[\[1\]](#) transatlantic slavery 200 years ago.

Culturally active Christians, especially, hail the film as a refreshingly well-done cinematic rendering of a historical hero that will be worth viewing and, if you’re so inclined, owning. Wilberforce’s story is an exemplar of how God can use faith, moral bravery along with biblical thinking and long-term action to transform culture for good.

Slavery then & now

The term “slavery” usually evokes images of forced-émigrés from Africa in the American South from the advent of the American colonies. Yet, slavery in some form is a feature of life in much of the world’s history and may be more rampant today than ever before. From indentured servants who willingly pledged submission to their masters to those bought and sold as property—as in the American and British systems—to those held in present-day fear and financial bondage right under our modern noses, slavery is simply a hard fact.

According to Probe writer Rusty Wright, the 18th Century British slave trade “was legal, lucrative, and brutal.”[\[2\]](#) Altering that reality was a life-cause for Wilberforce and his abolitionist brethren.

This was not always the sentiment among Christians, going back to the early Church. Although their ancient slavery was often more benign than in Wilberforce’s day, it surprises many to discover that such notables as Polycarp (Bishop of Smyrna), Clement of Alexandria, Athenagoras (Second Century Christian philosopher), and Origen held to slavery as a God-given right. Later Church luminaries such as St. Bonaventure agreed. Pope Paul III even granted the right of clergy to own slaves.[\[3\]](#)

Latin America’s pre-Columbian slave-based culture was prodigious, but how much does one hear of this or the claim that the Church ended it? Author Nancy Pearcey tells of a Mexican man [who] spoke from the audience at a recent conference:

My ancestors were the Aztecs. We were the biggest slave traders, and the slaves were used for human sacrifice—to make the sun rise each day! Our Aztec priests ripped out the beating hearts from living slaves who were sacrificed in our temples...

I don’t like it. I am not proud of it... It is part of our history. We have to face up to it.

Pointing out the unique ameliorative influence of the Christian faith as contrasted with Islam, he added:

And the slavery and human sacrifice in Mexico only stopped when Christianity came and brought it to an end. That is the fact of history. When are the Arabs going to face up to the facts of their own history, and to what is going on in many Muslim countries today? When are they going to rise up like the Christians to bring this slavery in their own countries

to an end?[{4}](#)

Using the film as a launching pad, present-day abolitionist groups continue a campaign to publicize and eradicate modern-day slavery. According to *World* magazine, “today 27 million people live on in captivity, their lives worth far less than any colonial era slave.”[{5}](#) “About 17,000 are trafficked annually in the United States.”[{6}](#)

Relative to the *chattel* slaves of Wilberforce’s day, for which owners paid heavy prices and held title deeds, today’s illegally held human “property” comes cheap—and blends in. Most are in debt bondage, some are contract laborers living under harsh conditions, and others are forced into marriage and prostitution. “Human trafficking, which ensnares 600,000 to 800,000 people a year, is the newest slave trade and the world’s third-largest criminal business after drugs and arms dealing.”[{7}](#)

Contemporary abolitionist, hands-on human rights campaigner, member of the British House of Lords and professed follower of Christ, the Baroness Caroline Cox points out that obliteration of the white slave trade lends hope to modern-day campaigns. “There have been many slaveries, but there has been only one abolition, which eventually shattered even the rooted and ramified slave systems of the Old World.”[{8}](#)

An “alliance of modern Wilberforces” includes “lawmakers, clergy, layers, bureaucrats, missionaries, social workers, and even reclusive Colorado billionaire Philip Anschutz,” who bankrolled the film *Amazing Grace*.[{9}](#) They seek to repeat Wilberforce’s success.

Opposition in Wilberforce’s day

Wilberforce and his compatriots faced an entrenched pro-slavery culture. “...The entire worldview of the British Empire

was what we today call social Darwinism. The rich and the powerful preyed on and abused the poor and the weak.”{10}

The British royal family sanctioned slavery. The great military hero of the day, Admiral Lord Nelson, denounced “the damnable doctrine of Wilberforce and his hypocritical allies.”{11}

Once again, the religious climate of the day tolerated institutionalized evil. In a chapter entitled “Slavery Abolished: A Christian Achievement” in his sweeping book *How Christianity Changed the World*, Alvin J. Schmidt writes, “A London church council decision of 1102, which had outlawed slavery and the slave trade{12}, was ignored.” Schmidt continues regarding religious hypocrisy, that the “revival of slavery” in Wilberforce’s time in Britain, Spain, Portugal and their colonies “...was lamentable because this time it was implemented by countries whose proponents of slavery commonly identified themselves as Christians, whereas during the African and Greco-Roman eras, slavery was the product of pagans.”{13}

Most compellingly, Wilberforce’s convictions put his own welfare at risk. Twice, West Indian sea captains threatened Wilberforce’s life.{14} This campaign was not a casual *cause célèbre* to him.

Wilberforce biographer Eric Metaxas states:

...The moral and social behavior of the entire culture...was hopelessly brutal, violent, selfish, and vulgar. He hoped to restore civility and Christian values to British society, because he knew that only then would the poor be lifted out of their misery.

Wilberforce's Secret: learn to disagree agreeably{15}

It has been fashionable, on occasion, to lionize William Wilberforce to the point of exaggeration. However, we can legitimately extract godly, courageous and wise principles from his life's story.

Holding fast to a distinctively biblical worldview will often come smack into conflict with the most cherished societal sins of one's day. It was slavery then, you name the issue today: abortion, gluttony, gambling, pornography, human trafficking. Yet, many a well-meaning activist has fallen prey to a crass loss of civility in the long battle to turn the tide of public opinion and policy.

Metaxas contrasts:

Wilberforce understood the Scripture about being wise as serpents and gentle as doves. He was a very wise man who worked with those from other views to further the causes God had called him to. Because of the depth of his faith, Wilberforce was a genuinely humble man who treated his enemies with grace—and of course that had great practical results.

Just as Cambridge professor Isaac Milner, his mentor to faith in Christ, had once stood against Wilberforce's skepticism agreeably, so he learned to do politically. He was relevant, shrewd, yet genuine. "Wilberforce wasn't full of pious platitudes. He really had the ability to translate the things of God in a way that people could really hear what he was saying," Metaxas says.

Even privately, his actions forcefully, yet humbly, disagreed with prevailing cultural winds. Metaxas describes his serious conviction to spend significant time raising his six children,

certainly uncommon for fathers in his day. One lasting result: “because of his fame [this] set the fashion with regard to family togetherness and being together on Sundays that lasted far into the 19th and even 20th centuries.”

The Christian worldview drove Wilberforce and his predecessors to oppose slavery and its effects

Wilberforce gained a reputation as a man of faith. Sir Walter Scott credited Wilberforce with being a spiritual leader among Parliamentarians. Biographer John Stoughton wrote that his effectiveness as speaker was greatest when he “appealed to the Christian consciences of Englishmen.”[\[16\]](#) Nonetheless, Wilberforce was his own biggest proponent of his need for grace.

The doctrines of *sola fide* (“by faith alone”) and *sola gratia* (“by grace alone”) formed the foundation of Wilberforce’s theology, or how he viewed God and His relation to the world. Metaxas relates, “He really knew that he was as wicked a sinner as the worst slave trader—without that sense of one’s own sinfulness, it’s very easy to become a moralizing Pharisee.”

Author and pastor John Piper writes:

...The doctrine of justification is essential to right living—and that includes political living... [The “Nominal Christians” or Christians in name only, of Wilberforce’s day] got things backward: First they strived for moral uplift, and then appealed to God for approval. That is not the Christian gospel. And it will not transform a nation. It would not sustain a politician through 11 parliamentary defeats over 20 years of vitriolic opposition.[\[17\]](#)

The Apostle Paul wrote, "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."[{18}](#) Sometimes it takes 20 years or much longer for the Spirit to move an entire culture! God is patient and works with our free wills, but accomplishes His purposes in the end.

Paul wrote several other times in Scripture regarding slavery. He told Philemon to treat his own slave as a brother. That is, lose the slave, gain a spiritual brother.

To the church in Galatia, Paul wrote that there was "neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free...for you are all one in Christ Jesus."[{19}](#) The status of slave was subsumed under the category of *believer*, where all are equal. "...Given the culturally ingrained practice of slavery...in the ancient world, Paul's words were revolutionary. The Philemon and Galatians passages laid the groundwork for the abolition of slavery, then and for the future."[{20}](#)

Anti-Slavery positions were commonplace in the Early Church. Slaves worshiped and communed with Christians at the same altar. Christians often freed slaves, even redeemed the slaves of others[{21}](#) (much like contemporary believers who buy freedom for Sudanese slaves). This equal treatment of slaves sometimes set Christians up as targets of persecution.[{22}](#)

Christianity is no stranger to abolition throughout history. Schmidt writes:

...The effort to remove slavery, whether it was Wilberforce in Britain or the abolitionists in America, was not a new phenomenon in Christianity. Nor were the efforts of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the American civil rights laws of the 1960s to remove racial segregation new to the Christian ethic. They were merely efforts to restore Christian practices that were already in existence in Christianity's primal days.[{23}](#)

The film *Blood Diamond* graphically portrays child soldiers brutally manipulated to do the killing for a rebel group in Africa, an actual contemporary tragedy. In the story's only bright spot, a gentle, fatherly African offers an apologetic for his work to rescue and rehabilitate boy warriors. The message is straightforward: do what you can in the moral morass, for "who knows which path leads to God?"

Wilberforce found the path—the Way, the Truth and the Life{24}—and it continues to light the way for people in bondage today. But it's only just begun, once again.

Notes

1. The 1807 Act of Parliament outlawed the trade in the British Empire. In fact, the trade continued among other nations and illegally among British outlaws.
2. "Amazing Grace Movie: Lessons for Today's Politicians," by Rusty Wright, www.probe.org/amazing-grace-movie-lessons-for-todays-politicians/, accessed 3-22-07.
3. "Slavery Abolished: A Christian Achievement," chapter 11, in *How Christianity Changed the World*, Alvin J. Schmidt, 276. Note: read further for examples of early Church Fathers and laypeople who opposed slavery and aided slaves.
4. From an email report entitled "Slavery and Its History," sent on behalf of author Nancey Pearcey to Phylogeny.net list 12/11/06.
5. *World*, Feb. 24, 2007, "Let my people go," by Priya Abraham, www.worldmag.com/articles/12700, accessed 3-21-07.
6. "Free at Last: how Christians worldwide are sabotaging the modern slave trade," Deann Alford, *Christianity Today*, March 2007, p. 32.
7. *World*, Abraham.
8. Ibid, "Whale of a man" (article sidebar). Quote from *This Immoral Trade: Slavery in the 21st Century* (Monarch Books, 2006), "a 175-page textbook, in a sense, featuring the history, the politics, the economics, and the present-day

reality of forced servitude around the world” according to World. Co-written with Cox by John Marks, a human-rights advocate, researcher who advocates for slaves regularly with Cox.

9. Alford, *Christianity Today*, p 32.

10. “Doing good and helping the poor,” interview with Wilberforce biographer Eric Metaxas, *World*, Feb. 24, 2007: www.worldmag.com/articles/12703, accessed 3-22-07.

11. Wright, accessed 3-21-07.

12. “The legal force of the event is actually open to question. The Council of Westminster (a collection of nobles) held in London issued a decree: ‘Let no one hereafter presume to engage in that nefarious trade in which hitherto in England men were usually sold like brute animals.’ However, the Council had no legislative powers, and no Act of law was valid unless signed by the Monarch.” From Wikipedia entry, “History of Slavery,” en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slave_trade#_note-2, accessed 3-23-07.

13. Schmidt, 276.

14. *World*, Metaxas interview, accessed 3-22-07

15. Ibid, entire section.

16. Schmidt, 277.

17. “Joy in the battle: Abolition and the roots of public justice,” John Piper, *World*, Feb. 24, 2007, www.worldmag.com/articles/12691, accessed 3-22-07.

18. 2 Corinthians 3:17

19. Galatians 3:28

20. Schmidt, 273.

21. Ibid, 274.

22. Ibid, 289.

23. Ibid, 290.

24. John 14:6

Reflection on the Virginia Tech Shootings

We moved our household this weekend, so I had not heard anything about the shootings at Virginia Tech until that same night. Next morning, I began reading articles to bring myself up to speed. The situation hurts. It was a student at the university, not some outsider. The gunman was 23, only three years younger than me.

Another person from my generation lashing out in violence; this is not the first time it's happened. This situation brings to mind several other recent occurrences, both locally and nationally. On a personal level, I recently found out that a guy from my high school who also graduated from my alma mater, University of Texas at Dallas (UTD), committed suicide recently. He was 26, an accomplished musician, national merit scholar, and earned a computer science degree.

During my junior year at UTD, a friend of mine at a Christian university came home for Christmas. While she was in Dallas, she received word that her dormitory roommate had committed suicide. She was a bright girl with a promising future and was apparently from a Christian family.

A month after I had graduated UTD, a news report came out that a student drugged, raped, and assaulted another student—during an exam study session.

Lastly, while reading about the Virginia Tech gunman's angst that finally snapped into a violent rage, I could not help but remember the Columbine shootings. That report came out my senior year in high school. The two teenage perpetrators were my age.

With all of these cases of violent crimes on campuses among young, educated people, I have to wonder, *What is wrong with my generation?* Why are these twenty-somethings breaking like this? Crime and violence are a part of the fallen world that we live in, but the inordinate amount of violent and sexual crimes on campuses is staggering.

My generation has received the most “information” from media than any other. We have seen the rise of technological advances that only Gene Rodenberry (*Star Trek*) could dream of. We have grown up thinking that every opportunity and possibility is at our fingertips (or at the click of a mouse). We have some of the fastest, most efficient cars, the biggest malls, and some of the best plastic surgery that money can buy. The nation is rich, and although material resources may not satisfy us in the long run, they sure feel good right now. We have medications for nearly everything, and beauty products for everything else. But apparently all of the riches, technology, beauty, and opportunities still leave us in despair—for some, despair to the point of death. Why? Is this an artifact for only this generation, or does the Bible speak to the despair plaguing us?

Consider the words of Solomon:

“I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself... I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces... Also whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure... Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 2:4,7-8,10-11).

Just as Solomon was blessed and lived in a time of education, materialism, and plenty, I think his hopelessness rings true of my generation as well. Compared to prior generations, we have it all, and yet it only fills us with despair that is really no different. There is a void that only God can fill. At the end of Ecclesiastes, Solomon concludes that the end of the matter is to fear the Lord and keep his commandments (12:13). In other words, when all is said and done, no amount of education, riches, or technology can compare to knowing the Lord through His Son Jesus Christ.

© 2007 Probe Ministries

Deadly College Shootings in U.S.

Some deadly shootings at U.S. colleges or universities, listed by number of fatalities:

April 16, 2007

A gunman kills 32 people in a dorm and a classroom building at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Va. The suspect then dies by gunshot himself.

Aug. 1, 1966

Charles Whitman points a rifle from the observation deck of the University of Texas at Austin's Tower and begins shooting in a homicidal rampage that goes on for 96 minutes. Sixteen people are killed, 31 wounded.

July 12, 1976

Edward Charles Allaway, a custodian in the library of California State University, Fullerton, fatally shoots seven

fellow employees and wounds two others. Mentally ill, Allaway believed his colleagues were pornographers and were forcing his estranged wife to appear in their movies. A judge found him innocent by reason of insanity in 1977 after a jury was unable to reach a verdict and he was committed to the state mental health system.

Nov. 1, 1991

Gang Lu, 28, a graduate student in physics from China, reportedly upset because he was passed over for an academic honor, opens fire in two buildings on the University of Iowa campus. Five University of Iowa employees killed, including four members of the physics department, one other person is wounded. The student fatally shoots himself.

May 4, 1970

Four students were killed and nine wounded by National Guard troops called in to quell anti-war protests on the campus of Kent State University in Ohio.

Oct. 28, 2002

Failing University of Arizona Nursing College student and Gulf War veteran Robert Flores, 40, walks into an instructor's office and fatally shoots her. A few minutes later, armed with five guns, he enters one of his nursing classrooms and kills two more of his instructors before fatally shooting himself.

Sept. 2, 2006

Douglas W. Pennington, 49, kills himself and his two sons, Logan P. Pennington, 26, and Benjamin M. Pennington, 24, during a visit to the campus of Shepherd University in Shepherdstown, W.Va.

Jan. 16, 2002

Graduate student Peter Odighizuwa, 42, recently dismissed from

Virginia's Appalachian School of Law, returns to campus and kills the dean, a professor and a student before being tackled by students. The attack also wounds three female students.

Aug. 15, 1996

Frederick Martin Davidson, 36, a graduate engineering student at San Diego State, is defending his thesis before a faculty committee when he pulls out a handgun and kills three professors.

Jan. 26, 1995

Former law student Wendell Williamson shoots two men to death and injures a police officer in Chapel Hill, N.C.

April 2, 2007

University of Washington researcher Rebecca Griego, 26, is shot to death in her office by former boyfriend Jonathan Rowan who then turned the gun on himself.

Aug. 28, 2000

James Easton Kelly, 36, a University of Arkansas graduate student recently dropped from a doctoral program after a decade of study and John Locke, 67, the English professor overseeing his coursework, are shot to death in an apparent murder-suicide.

Source: Associated Press

Accessed Apr. 17, 2007 © 2007 MSNBC.com
<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/18137414/>

A Christian Response to the Horror at Virginia Tech

Many of us found ourselves glued to the television, watching videos of the events surrounding the mass murder in Blacksburg, Virginia. A day like all other days for thousands of college students, faculty, administrators, and all the rest that make up the mini-city of Virginia Tech University suddenly turned into a waking nightmare, the kind of experience that happens on TV but never really happens to us. Or so we think. I've been to the campus in Blacksburg; it isn't the kind of place one would imagine mass murder. But where *would* one expect such a thing, except in far away places like Iraq?

In such situations, our emotions typically take the lead since it takes awhile to get all the information that informs our thinking. What emotions do we experience? Shock? Fear, as we think about students of our own there or at similar campuses? Sadness for the loss of life, especially for such senseless loss? Another sense we have, sometimes not till after the initial shock has worn off, is moral outrage, a deep-seated sense that what happened was wrong: not in terms of economics or simply the proper functioning of an organization, but in terms of moral wrong. Deep down we know there is good and there is evil, and this event was evil.

But upon what do we base this sense? Before you just brush the question aside with the ubiquitous "Duh!" or ask incredulously, "What kind of question is *that*?!" pause a moment and give it some thought. Why is such a thing wrong? After all, if we push a Darwinian, naturalistic worldview to the limit, we might think ourselves justified in seeing this kind of horror as really no different from animals attacking and killing each other. Keep in mind that the Nazis were able to carry out their slaughter because they had relegated Jews

to a lower level in the evolutionary chain.

The first point I want to make is that *Christianity explains our moral outrage*. It's explained by the fact that we are created in God's image and have in us a sense of moral right and wrong. The apostle Paul wrote that "the requirements of the law are written on [our] hearts," that our "consciences [are] also bearing witness, and [our] thoughts now accusing, now even defending [us]" (Romans 2:15). God is the standard of moral right and wrong, and we reflect that knowledge in ourselves. Of course, we can deaden that knowledge; a conscience can be trained to ignore promptings to do good.

Have you seen someone get angry (or maybe you got angry yourself) when a person who commits such an evil act commits suicide immediately afterwards? Oh, I know: some people ultimately want the person to die himself. But there's something about being denied to express our moral outrage at the person. We want justice for the crime committed, and we don't always want it to be a quick and dirty justice. Frankly, we'd like the person to suffer and know what he's suffering for.

How do we explain our desire for justice? What I described above is more a desire for vengeance. However, we do want justice. We want the person to face up to the charges, to hear the condemnation (consider the trials where families of victims get to speak their minds to the accused). We want him to know he did wrong and to know he's going to suffer the consequences, and then we want justice meted out.

Along the same lines that Christianity explains moral outrage, it also *explains our desire for justice*. We know some things are morally wrong and are deserving of punishment. And we want to make a strong enough impression on the guilty that he (or observers of the case) doesn't do it again. God is very interested in justice. A quick search in the New International Version lists almost one hundred twenty instances of the word

“justice” in the Old Testament. The psalmist writes, “The LORD loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love” (33:5). “Truth is nowhere to be found,” God said through Isaiah, “and whoever shuns evil becomes a prey. The LORD looked and was displeased that there was no justice” (Isa. 59:15). And, “Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow” (1:15-17).

This isn’t just an Old Testament concern. In the New Testament we have this promise: “For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead” (Acts 17:31).

A question comes naturally to mind. If God is so interested in justice, why doesn’t He fulfill it now? This is an extremely important question. However, it’s one I’m going to forego for now (search Probe’s Web site for articles on the problem of evil; Sue Bohlin’s article [“The Value of Suffering”](#) is a good start). The long and short of it is that we don’t know just what God is up to. We can hazard some guesses. C. S. Lewis said that suffering is God’s “megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”

Let’s say we *can’t* give an answer to the question, Why is evil allowed? What then? If that’s the primary criterion for accepting a particular religion or philosophy as true, we will be able to accept none, not even secularism!

What, then? Where does that leave us? Christianity does have an answer to that: *Christianity offers hope*. Even in the worst of situations, the person who has received the grace of God in salvation has the hope of a future in which death has no place. This isn’t “hope” as in cross-your-fingers hope, like, “I sure hope the game doesn’t get rained out this weekend.” In

the New Testament, hope is presented as the assurance of the future. We have the hope of eternal life—of that life which has no room for death—by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The apostle Peter wrote, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3). Jesus proved that He had broken the hold of death through His own death on the cross by breaking free from the tomb and appearing live to hundreds of people. Because He rose and conquered death, we who trust in Him will, too.

Hope is a fundamental ingredient of Christianity. Faith enables us to say “yes” today to what we know we should do; hope enables us to say “yes” to the future, because it rests in the hands of the God Who loves us. One of my favorite verses in Scripture is in Romans. Paul wrote: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (15:13). This is God’s desire for us, to live in the (sure) hope that our future is secure in Him.

One more thing. Christianity isn’t just some set of religious dogmas and practices that keeps some of us off the streets on Sunday mornings! *Christianity provides a way of life that minimizes such tragedies.* It provides both the framework within which we order our lives *and* the ability to do it by the power of the Holy Spirit living in us. Blaise Pascal held out the value of Christian morality as an enticement to see if Christianity is true. Even if it isn’t true, he said, look at the kind of life it calls us to lead! Thomas Jefferson, who so rejected the miraculous in the Bible that he edited out of the New Testament all such things, recognized a high level of morality in its pages. And when you ask people who the best exemplars of goodness have been in history, Jesus is typically on the list, even the lists of those who don’t believe He is the divine Son of God.

The point is that built into Christianity is a structure of life that prohibits people hurting each other. Of course, this isn't to suggest that Christians never do wrong! But it *is* to say that we have more than just pragmatic reasons for doing right. We do right to honor God, to honor people, because we believe in moral right and wrong. Sometimes we do the right thing—only because it's the right thing to do, regardless of the rewards! However, I would be dishonest if I didn't note that there *does* lie in our future many blessings for obedient lives.

But Christianity goes beyond simply providing a moral code. It also provides the power to follow it! The Holy Spirit somehow resides in us (one of the mysteries of the faith!), and He transforms us, changes us through a number of ways into the image of Christ (cf. Rom. 8:5-17; 12:1,2; Gal. 5:16-26).

To sum up: Christianity explains our moral outrage at the mass murders at Virginia Tech this week. It explains our desire for justice, and guarantees that it will be carried out eventually. It offers real hope, hope that is sure, for those who suffer. And it provides a way for people to live with one another without having a reason to give in to such evil impulses.

It's likely that some people will read this who aren't Christians. If you're one of them, I'd like to ask you to consider thoughtfully what I've said about Christianity, but also consider what *you* believe. You may be an adherent of another religion or philosophy, or you may simply be a secularist who believes in God but believes He doesn't really have much to do with our lives. My question is this: If you agree that the issues I've raised are important, how does your belief system answer them? If it *does* answer them, do the answers seem plausible? Is there good reason to believe them? If not, maybe the whole belief system needs to be evaluated.

If you'd like to know more about a Christian understanding of

these issues, hunt around on our Web site for other articles. Or [send us an e-mail](#). You can even use the old-fashioned method of calling on the phone!

We'd love to hear from you.

© 2007 Probe Ministries

Virginia Tech Massacre: Coping with Grief

As the world joins Virginia Tech in mourning a terrible massacre, I've found myself experiencing poignant memories of an earlier visit to that campus when students also struggled with recent death. Though that tragedy was smaller in scope, grief and confusion abounded then as now.

Several months before my evening lecture at Virginia Tech, I had recommended that my hosts have me speak on love, sex, and dating . . . nearly always a popular campus draw. But they preferred I speak on death and dying: [One Minute After Death](#). Reluctantly, I agreed; they publicized accordingly. Though they didn't claim clairvoyance, their selection proved providential.

A few days before my presentation, three Tech students died tragically in separate incidents involving suicide and a fire. The campus buzzed with concern about death and dying. The lecture venue was packed; the atmosphere electric.

Death's Shuddering Finality

I told the audience of similar sadness: The spring of my sophomore year at Duke, the student living in the room next to

me was struck and killed by lightning. For some time after Mike's death, our fraternity was in a state of shock. My friends wrestled with questions like, "What's life all about?" "What does it mean if it can be snuffed out in an instant?" "Is there life after death?"

Our springtime happiness became gloom. A memorial service and personal interaction helped us process our grief. I vividly recall a classmate driving Mike's ashes home to Oklahoma at the end of the term. Death had a shuddering finality.

Now, in the recent massacre's immediate aftermath, stories both heartrending and inspiring are emerging. Rescue workers removing bodies from Norris Hall, where the bulk of the killings occurred, encountered cellphones ringing, likely parents or friends trying to contact missing students. Parents wandered the campus that first evening seeking to learn their children's fate.

During the siege, engineering professor [Liviu Librescu](#), an Israeli Holocaust survivor, blocked a door with his body, sacrificing his life so students could flee.^{1}

God and Evil?

As mourners process their anguish, it's only natural to wonder where God is in all this. Virginia Governor Tim Kaine, who once served as a volunteer missionary, noted at the campus convocation that even Jesus, in his dark hour on the cross, cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"^{2} He encouraged grieving students to embrace their community to help everyone process their pain.

The late William Sloane Coffin gained fame as a controversial peace and civil rights activist during the Vietnam War. He also served as chaplain of Yale University and had a helpful take on the question of God and suffering.

"Almost every square inch of the Earth's surface is soaked

with the tears and blood of the innocent," [Coffin told Religion and Ethics Newsweekly](#), "and it's not God's doing. It's our doing. That's human malpractice. Don't chalk it up to God."

"When [people] see the innocent suffering," continued Coffin, "every time they lift their eyes to heaven and say, 'God, how could you let this happen?' it's well to remember that exactly at that moment God is asking exactly the same question of us: 'How could you let this happen?'" [\[3\]](#)

The problem of evil has many complex facets, but the horror in Blacksburg resulted from human action. Students and faculty face considerable healing. President Bush reminded them, "People who have never met you are praying for you.... In times like this, we can find comfort in the grace and guidance of a loving God.... 'Don't be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.'" [\[4\]](#) Sound counsel for a grieving campus community.

Notes

1. Laurie Copans, "Holocaust Survivor Killed in Virginia Shootings," Associated Press, April 17, 2007; on ABC News at <http://abcnews.go.com/US/story?id=3048967&page=1>, accessed April 18, 2007. See also Richard T. Cooper and Valerie Reitman, "Virginia Tech professor gave his life to save students," Los Angeles Times, April 18, 2007; <http://tinyurl.com/2lnomg>, accessed April 18, 2007.
2. Matthew 27:46, quoted here from the more contemporary language of the New Living Translation. Kaine appeared to be quoting from the King James Version. Audio of Governor Kaine's April 17, 2007, Virginia Tech convocation speech is at <http://www.vbdems.org/>, accessed April 18, 2007.
3. "Profile: William Sloane Coffin," Religion & Ethics Newsweekly interview with Bob Abernathy, Episode no. 752, originally broadcast August 27, 2004; rebroadcast in 2007; <http://tinyurl.com/2vdr6t>, accessed April 18, 2007.
4. Text of the president's April 17, 2007 speech at the

Virginia Tech memorial convocation is at <http://tinyurl.com/2t6txa>, accessed April 18, 2007. The third sentence in the Bush quotation here is from Romans 12:21.

Copyright © 2007 Rusty Wright

Paris Hilton and What We Want

Paris Hilton. Paris Hilton. Paris Hilton. Paris Hilton. Paris Hilton.

Please excuse the repetition, but I want this article to score highly in Google searches.

You see, [Google Zeitgeist](#), the mega-search engine's report on its most popular search topics, says the heiress scored number one on 2006 Google News searches. The report presents a glimpse of the "spirit of the times," giving clues to websurfers' interests.

In news (yes, I said "news," not "entertainment") searches, Paris beat Orlando Bloom, cancer, and Hurricane Katrina. Borat and Hezbollah topped "Who is" searches. Among U.S. searches for "Scandal," the [Duke Lacrosse](#) episode took three of the first four slots.

What else do people want to know about? Google's top-ten lists in various categories include MySpace, Nicole Kidman, Tom Cruise, Britney Spears, Paul McCartney, Pamela Anderson, Reggie Bush, and Clay Aiken.

Why do celebrities and entertainment rank so high? Perhaps it's the desire to connect with something larger than ourselves. Maybe boredom explains some celebrity obsession. And don't rule out diversion.

For some—maybe many—daily life ranges from harried to overwhelming: soured relationships, job conflict, financial pressure, health distress. Diverting focus can ease your troubled mind, at least temporarily.

Of course, everyone needs mental and emotional breaks. Diversion can be a healthy coping mechanism—until it becomes obsessive. Then it can lead to denying reality, perhaps obscuring genuine wants and needs.

Suppose we had a mind/heart/soul reader to discover what people really want once their basic physical needs are met. What would we find? Psychologist Abraham Maslow's renowned hierarchy of basic needs includes safety, love, esteem and self-actualization.[\[1\]](#) Perhaps our soul reader would detect desires for acceptance, thriving personal friendships, peace of mind, health, security.

Maslow also realized that several profound fears—including the fear of death—trouble humanity.[\[2\]](#) Our soul reader might find that people also want an answer to death.

Anthropologist Ernest Becker argued in his Pulitzer Prize-winning book, [*The Denial of Death*](#),[\[3\]](#) that much human behavior can be explained by a deep desire to deny death's reality, to repress "the terror of death." No wonder. Which would you enjoy more, right this minute: contemplating your own death and its aftermath . . . or reading, exercising, web- or channel surfing, conversing, partying, working, shopping, etc.?

If we don't have a solution to fear of death, we can invent ways to avoid thinking about it. Alas, attractive and even worthwhile pursuits can become enslaving. Amassing the most "toys"; rat-race schedules; obsession with career, job, education, sports or even friends can insulate people from facing their own mortality.

The biblical book of Hebrews presents a similar analysis of

the human dilemma, reasoning that people “have lived all their lives as slaves to the fear of dying.” {4} It claims that Jesus died to “deliver” people from this slavery so they might connect with God in time and eternity.

It seems morbid to always be thinking about your own death. But could avoiding it altogether constitute unhealthy denial? Could excessive focus on certain pursuits become risky diversion from life’s real issues, like personal meaning, personal worth, fulfilling relationships, and what Sigmund Freud called “the painful riddle of death”?{5}

Could obsession with Paris Hilton and her *Google Zeitgeist* pals conceal deep longings, insecurities and fears in individual web surfers and in society at large?

As the esteemed British philosopher and rocker Sir Mick Jagger [famously counseled](#), “You can’t always get what you want. But if you try sometime . . . you just might find you get what you need.” {6} A friendly question for my fellow web surfers: Is what you want, what you need?

Notes

1. A. H. Maslow (1943), “A Theory of Human Motivation”; Originally Published in *Psychological Review*, 50, 370-396; at <http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Maslow/motivation.htm>, accessed December 28, 2006.
2. Abraham H. Maslow, *Religions, Values, and Peak-Experiences* (Penguin Books Limited, ©1964 by Kappa Delta Pi and ©1970 [preface] The Viking Press), Appendix A, “Religious Aspects of Peak-Experiences,” items 8 & 14; at <http://www.druglibrary.org/schaffer/lsd/maslowa.htm>, accessed December 28, 2006.
3. Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1997; original copyright was 1973).
4. Hebrews 2:15 NLT.
5. Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (New York: W.W.

Norton, 1961 edition; James Strachey translator and editor; original work was published in 1928) 19.

6. Mick Jagger and Keith Richards (songwriters), "You Can't Always Get What You Want." Lyrics at <http://rollingstones.com/discog/index.php?v=so&a=1&id=124>; accessed December 28, 2006.

Copyright © 2007 Rusty Wright

A Little Kramer in All of Us?

Comedian Michael Richards—"Kramer" on TV's *Seinfeld*—saw his racist tirade at African-American hecklers ignite a firestorm. Mel Gibson, whose earlier anti-Semitic rant made headlines, said he felt compassion for Richards.^{1}

Lots of people have dark sides. Maybe everyone. Maybe you.

I do.

Remember Susan Hawk? Her infamous diatribe against [another CBS Survivor contestant](#) declared if she found her "laying there dying of thirst, I would not give you a drink of water. I would let the vultures take you and do whatever they want with you."^{2}

Richards—like Gibson—apologized profusely. Prominent African-American comic Paul Mooney says [Richards told him privately](#), "He didn't know he had that ugliness in him."^{3}

I can identify with Richards' surprise at his darker inner impulses. My own failing was private rather than public, differing in degree but not in kind. It taught me valuable lessons.

Growing up in the US South, I learned from my parents and educators to be tolerant and accepting in a culture that often was not. Racism still makes my blood boil. I've [sought to promote racial sensitivity](#).

One summer during university, I joined several hundred students—most of us Caucasian—for a South Central Los Angeles outreach project. We spent a weekend living in local residents' homes, attending their churches, and meeting people in the community.

A friend and I enjoyed wonderful hospitality from a lovely couple. Sunday morning, their breakfast table displayed a mountain of delicious food. Our gracious hostess wanted to make sure our appetites were completely satisfied. It was then, eying that bountiful spread, that it hit me.

I realized that for the first time in my life, I was living in Black persons' home, sitting at "their" table, eating "their" food, using "their" utensils. Something inside me reacted negatively. The strange feeling was not anger or hatred, more like mild aversion. Not powerful, not dramatic, certainly not expressed. But neither was it rational or pleasant or honorable or at all appropriate. It horrified and shamed me, especially since I had recently become a follower of Jesus.

The feeling only lasted a few moments. But it taught me important lessons about prejudice. Much as I might wish to deny it, I had inner emotions that, if expressed, could cause terrible pain. I who prided myself on racial openness had to deal with inner bigotry. How intense must such impulses be in those who are less accepting? Maybe similar inner battles—large or small—go on inside many people. I became deeply impressed that efforts at social harmony should not neglect the importance of changing human hearts.

Holocaust survivor Yehiel Dinur testified during the trial of Adolph Eichmann, the Nazi leader responsible for killing

millions of Jews. When he saw Eichmann in the courtroom, he sobbed and collapsed to the floor. Dinur later explained, "I was afraid about myself. I saw that I am capable to do this. . . Exactly like he. . . . Eichmann is in all of us." {4}

Jeremiah, an ancient Jewish sage, wrote, "The human heart is most deceitful and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is?" {5} A prescription from one of Jesus' friends helped me overcome my inner struggles that morning in South Central: "If we say we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and refusing to accept the truth. But if we confess our sins to [God], he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong." {6}

Notes

1. "Mel Gibson Feels Michael Richards' Pain," Associated Press, November 29, 2006; AOL Entertainment News: <http://tinyurl.com/vh2nf>, accessed December 3, 2006.
2. Tim Cuprisin, "Susan Hawk stays afloat on 'Survivor' celebrity," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, January 23, 2001; <http://www2.jsonline.com/enter/tvradio/jan01/survive23012201.asp>, accessed December 3, 2006.
3. "Paul Mooney Cites Richards in N-Word Ban," Associated Press November 29, 2006, <http://tinyurl.com/5pxnxy>, accessed December 3, 2006.
4. Charles W. Colson, "The Enduring Revolution," excerpts of his 1993 Templeton Address; <http://www.gcts.edu/communications/contact/fall04/article03.php>, accessed December 3, 2006.
5. Jeremiah 17:9 NLT.
6. 1 John 1:8-9 NLT.

Superman Returns: Superhero Still Needed?

Does the world still need a superhero?

Watch out, bad guys, as *Superman Returns* . . . fighting movie villains, rescuing the imperiled, desiring Lois Lane (now a single mom), saving the world.

The guy is everywhere. Superman's promotional ties include Burger King, Duracell, got milk?, even a dating website. NBA star Shaquille O'Neal has a Superman logo tattooed on his arm. Archvillain Lex Luthor hacked Superman's website, linking to his own MySpace.com webpage. Marketers work every angle.

Why has the Superman story remained so popular? What is it about the Man of Steel that captures the public imagination?

In the 1930's, the Great Depression had the world slumping. Fascist and Nazi menaces haunted Europe. Two Cleveland teenagers dreamed up a hero who would rescue the troubled, inspire hope, and set things right. The story was born.

In the new film, *Daily Planet* editor Perry White instructs his staff to cover everything they can about Superman's return. He especially wants to know, "Does he still stand for truth, justice, all that stuff?"

He does, and that's one reason Superman's appeal endures. Some probably many want to identify with someone bigger than themselves who embodies what's honorable, a hero to admire or emulate.

Look, up in the sky!

Lots of people need rescuing these days from crime on the streets and in the boardrooms, troubled relationships, terrorism, war, disease, nuclear threats. Superman has power. He cares for distressed people. And he's humble.

Plain, ordinary Clark Kent could be everyhuman. His mild mannered disguise hides phenomenal abilities. Ever dream of your peers, your foes, or the world glimpsing the real you, the one with more to offer than ever gets appreciated?

My childhood heroes included Superman, the Lone Ranger, and Zorro. I wore their costumes as I watched their television programs. Their struggles for good energized my youthful imagination.

Of course, not everyone believes the world needs saving. The new Lois Lane says, "The world doesn't need a savior; neither do I." Superman tells her, "But every day I hear people crying for one."

Superman's biological father, JorEl (voiced by the late Marlon Brando), prepared counsel for his child, KalEl, whom he launched into space as their planet, Krypton, exploded. Of earthlings: "They can be a great people, KalEl. They wish to be. They only lack the light to show the way. For this reason above all their capacity for good I have sent them you . . . my only son."

My only son . . .

Spiritual parallels have not been lost on media observers. *Rolling Stone* feels Brando's words "establish . . . (Superman) as a Christ figure." Jesus, of course, referred to himself as God's "only Son" sent to rescue the world: "I have come as a light to shine in this dark world, so that all who put their trust in me will no longer remain in the darkness."

Superman creators Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster were Jewish. “El” is a Hebrew word for “God.” The biblical Moses’ mother hid him in a basket in the Nile River to save his life.

Superman Returns director Bryan Singer, who is Jewish, acknowledges that biblical imagery both messianic and Mosaic have influenced the Superman saga. An adopted only child, picked on in youth, Singer says he’s often felt like an outcast.

How does Superman inspire him? “I think most people do believe in that kind of integrity and virtue,” Singer observed in a documentary. “They want to see goodness. People have a deep need to believe that it exists out there.”

Superhero a real one still needed.

Anyone out there “still stand for truth, justice, all that stuff?” Anyone qualify as “the Light of the world”?

© 2006 Rusty Wright

Animal House Considers God

How would you like this introduction for your speaking engagement?

The terrazzo floor is glazed with stale, dry beer from the weekend’s wild party. As students stream into the dining room, it is obvious no self-respecting cockroach would have wanted to live in the adjoining kitchen. A few composite portraits of members hang – somewhat askew – on the paneled walls. The room buzzes as the 60 men swap stories and engage in friendly

banter. Then their leader gavels them to order. Welcome to the fraternity chapter meeting.

First up is a profanity-laced tirade by the president condemning two rival University of Miami fraternities and a UM campus administrator. Next, an officer blasts some members for lagging participation. A sharp crack of the gavel awakens a sleeping brother, who responds with an obscene gesture. The president declares he is stressed out and cannot wait to get away for spring break so he can get drunk and sleep with some chicks he does not know. A few minutes later he announces a speaker who has come to talk about brotherhood.

As you step up to speak, you might think, ***So, I break my back raising support to get to do this?***

Some friends, Christian campus workers at the University of Miami, lined me up to speak at this fraternity. Ken and Robert were eager to reach the campus Greek community. Of course, fraternity and sorority members have no special standing in God's eyes. But Greeks are leaders on many campuses, with significant potential influence for Christ. They often live together which helps facilitate small groups and discipleship. Ken was a member of this fraternity on another campus, as was I, and his relationships in the Miami chapter opened doors. We prayed that God would work through this meeting.

My opening joke bombed. My stories and illustrations about communication skills, conflict resolution, and brotherly love seemed to connect; they laughed and appeared more relaxed. The chapter advisor had told me that internal feuds were affecting his men. As I spoke, I was convinced the Holy Spirit had arranged this presentation on this topic for this audience at this moment. To catch a glimpse of what went on that evening, here is a bit of what the men heard.

Backfired Road Trip And Brotherly Love Quotient

I related this incident: During my freshman year in college, two other pledges and I took my fraternity big brother (an older student mentor) on a road trip. We borrowed his car (he was generous), took him to dinner, and then drove to a remote location with plans to strand him there. All went according to plan until we arrived at the remote location. Somehow, he overpowered us, grabbed the keys, and drove off, leaving **us** to find our way home. Of course, we were red-faced. Eventually, his forgiveness soothed our embarrassment.

In the same way, these men to whom I spoke could forgive when wronged, but care enough to confront when appropriate. Balancing truth and grace can be challenging.

Some questions helped them analyze their attitudes and brotherly love quotient:

- 1. How often do I use biting sarcasm?*
- 2. How do I act toward members whose participation lags?*
- 3. Do I participate in chapter activities as I should? How is my attitude?*
- 4. How do I feel about the brother who casts a vote against my favorite rushee (prospective member)?*
- 5. How do I relate to rushees to whom we did not extend bids to join the fraternity? Later, when I see them on campus, do I give a friendly smile and greeting? Or was all that just for rush?*
- 6. I am madly in love with the beautiful blond in Chemistry 101. So is another member of my chapter ... and **they** are going out tonight. How do I feel toward that brother?*

Number six may be the ultimate test of brotherly love.

How does one get the internal power to love and accept others unconditionally? I related to these men that as I struggled with this question some friends suggested I consider the spiritual dimension. I learned in coming to faith as a freshman that God can provide inner power to enhance life and relationships.

The men seemed fairly attentive and were gracious in their applause. Had the Holy Spirit penetrated hearts? The men's written comments gave some clues:

- *"On target."*
- *"Very good but a bit idealistic to me."*
- *"If I did not know any better, I would have thought that you had lived here for months. You clearly know the ins and outs of fraternity life, and you hit the nail right on the head. I especially like what you said about the situation where two brothers like the same girl [sic]; it happens more than we would like to admit. Thank you."*
- *"Boring."*
- *"Very sincere. I am not the most spiritual person. But you made sense."*
- *"You read my mind."*
- *"I would be interested in receiving your articles and more about brotherhood."*

Arrogance, wrath, and lasciviousness sometime mask empty hurting hearts.

Ken continued his ministry in that house. Two years later, the chapter gathered at 11 p.m. to hear a Christian perspective on sex. When my host and I departed after midnight, several men

followed us out the door with heartfelt questions. Animal house was not a church sanctuary, but God was at work.

Lessons For Communicating In Secular Universities

Consider some lessons from this story that relate to one-on-one, small-group, and public speaking situations.

Pray

Ken, Robert, other friends, and I prayed before the outreach. The warm response was God's answer. Wisdom and skill help, but ultimately it is God who works in hearts.

Meet on their turf

To present Christ to hardened nonbelievers in their own home might seem scary, but they feel much more comfortable there among their friends than they would in a church or a neutral campus location. Use various outreach venues as appropriate, but also go where people are. Jesus and Paul went to homes, the marketplace, synagogues, and schools.

Transcend differences

In a Greek house or dormitory, you may encounter uncomfortable scenarios: pinups, porn, drunkenness, and foul language. At a campus-wide outreach meeting in my fraternity house, one member welcomed guests while tied to a cross. Other members heckled the speaker. The speaker responded with poise, engaging them in friendly dialogue about Jesus. We are seeking to rescue lost people who do not always feel lost. Pick your battles and learn to overlook the natural flaws of natural people so you can relate spiritual truth.

Establish personal relationships

Ken's friendships with fraternity leaders helped open doors for our meeting and for continued ministry there. That we were

both members of their fraternity did not hurt. Use the opportunities you are given; but warm, personal relationships can open many doors for the gospel.

Use humor and stories

Those men could relate to the story about my backfired road trip, laughing with – and at – me. Humor can involve risk. I have studied, written about, taught, and used humor often. I also have had hilarious stories fall flat. Learn from these situations, develop recovery techniques, but realize that circumstances and specific audiences may generate different reactions. Do not be discouraged when your best zingers or illustrations bomb. Ask others to critique your presentation, but keep telling stories to connect with today's campus culture.

Connect with their situation

Learn your listeners' intellectual and emotional languages. This applies to any people group you seek to reach, whether they reside in remote forested jungles or nearby academic ones. In this case, stories about fraternity life and recognizable social situations – using terms familiar to them – helped gain and hold attention.

Connect their interests with spiritual matters

The brotherly love quotient questions helped listeners consider their need for inner strength to love unconditionally. From that point, discussing spiritual matters, God's inner power, and my own journey to faith followed naturally. Do not simply tack the gospel onto your secular material. Show a clear connection.

Trust the Holy Spirit for long-term fruit and open doors

After Paul presented Christ to the Greek philosophers on Mars Hill, "some laughed, but others said, 'We want to hear more

about this later.’ ... Some joined him and became believers” (Acts 17:32,34, NLT).{1} Similarly, in our attempts to reach secular students and professors, some will scorn, some will want to know more, and some will believe. As we are faithful to trust the Holy Spirit to open hearts and doors of opportunity, God will work. “The king’s heart is like channels of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He wishes” (Proverbs 21:1, NASB).{2}

Notes

1. Scripture quotations marked NLT are taken from ***The Holy Bible New Living Translation***, copyright ©1996. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, Illinois 60189. All rights reserved.

2. Scripture quotation taken from the ***New American Standard Bible***[®], Copyright ©1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. (www.Lockman.org).

Copyright © 2006 Rusty Wright. Reprinted by permission.

Duke Lacrosse: Ethical Reflections

Written by Rusty Wright

The Duke lacrosse story has multiple ingredients for explosive media coverage: sex, race, politics, criminal charges, sports, class, a prestigious institution the list goes on.

Like many Duke alumni, I have personal convictions about the scandal. My Duke experience was and remains positive. So I’m

biased. But I'm also realistic. Houston, we have a problem.

As much of the civilized world knows, a hired African-American stripper alleged some white players raped her at a lacrosse party. The accuser attended nearby North Carolina Central University. The accused maintain their innocence. The lacrosse coach resigned. Duke cancelled the season.

During basketball season, it was often "All Duke, all the time" on America's sports pages. Through much of the Spring, it became "All Duke, all the time" on the front pages.

Nowadays at Duke, quips one professor, historical calendars are not reckoned "BC" and "AD" but "BLC" and "ALC." "Before the Lacrosse Crisis" and "After the Lacrosse Crisis."

I'm glad Duke President Richard Broadhead emphasizes the presumption of innocence in criminal law. Travels in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union have exposed me to chilling stories about presuming guilt.

At an April reunion, I found the campus buzzing with controversy. Some students conveyed deep personal pain about race and gender issues. At their national tournament in May, Duke women lacrosse players wore wristbands and headbands supporting the men's team.

Broadhead commissioned an ongoing Campus Culture Initiative emphasizing responsibility and respect. In my view, he's handled a difficult situation with exceptional grace, dignity, and transparency.

What ethical lessons might come from this episode? Of course, if rape occurred, punishment should ensue.

But setting aside the rape allegations, what about the ethics of hiring a stripper? What principles should determine how we act in life?

When I was an undergraduate, a friend from the fraternity next

door excitedly told me the dean had just given his fraternity permission to host a topless dancer at their Saturday night party in university housing.

Fast forward to 2006. On one television program, a woman argued that her own stripping had paid her college bills, and besides, it allowed her to exercise power over men.

Suppose you were a Duke student. Should you host or attend such a party? Hiring a stripper broke no laws. Both the players and the young woman could claim benefit. What's the harm?

A pragmatist might maintain, "In retrospect, it was more trouble than it was worth." A libertarian might assert, "Stripping's OK, if no one gets hurt." Some absolutists might say, "No. Never." Feminists could argue either side. Stripping exploits women as sex objects, a negative cultural influence. Yet a woman needs to earn a living.

Duke ethicist Elizabeth Kiss, soon to become Agnes Scott College president, recommends a starting point for answering the classic question, "How should I act?" She notes that the "[Golden Rule](#)" appears in various forms in different faith traditions.

Good point. Jesus said, "In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you."

The Jewish Talmud says, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor."

Muhammad said, "Not one of you truly believes until you wish for others what you wish for yourself."

On Duke's main quadrangle sits a [plaque](#) containing the first article of the university's bylaws. The statement promotes truth, scholarship, freedom, tolerance, and service. It begins as follows:

"The aims of Duke University are to assert a faith in the eternal union of knowledge and religion set forth in the teachings and character of Jesus Christ, the Son of God..."

Hmmm. An ethical guideline worth considering?

© 2006 Rusty Wright. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

"Real Answers™" furnished courtesy of The Amy Foundation Internet Syndicate. To contact the author or The Amy Foundation, write or E-mail to: P. O. Box 16091, Lansing, MI 48901-6091; amyfoundtn@aol.com. Visit the website at www.amyfound.org.

v

Redeeming the Da Vinci Code

Dr. Michael Gleghorn critiques The Da Vinci Code's theories, demonstrating that most of these theories are simply false.



This article is also available in [Spanish](#).

Introduction to *The Da Vinci Code*

Dan Brown's novel, *The Da Vinci Code*,[{1}](#) has generated a huge amount of interest from the reading public. About forty million copies have been sold worldwide.[{2}](#) And Ron Howard and Sony Pictures have brought the story to theatres.[{3}](#) To help answer some of the challenges which this novel poses to biblical Christianity, Probe has teamed up with EvanTell, an evangelism training ministry, to produce a DVD series called *Redeeming The Da Vinci Code*. The series aims to strengthen the faith of believers and equip them to share their faith with

those who see the movie or have read the book.[{4}](#) I hope this article will also encourage you to use this event to witness to the truth to friends or family who have read the book or seen the movie.

Why so much fuss about a novel? The story begins with the murder of the Louvre's curator. But this curator isn't just interested in art; he's also the Grand Master of a secret society called the Priory of Sion. The Priory guards a secret that, if revealed, would discredit biblical Christianity. Before dying, the curator attempts to pass on the secret to his granddaughter Sophie, a cryptographer, and Harvard professor Robert Langdon, by leaving a number of clues that he hopes will guide them to the truth.

So what's the secret? The location and identity of the Holy Grail. But in Brown's novel, the Grail is not the cup allegedly used by Christ at the Last Supper. It's rather Mary Magdalene, the wife of Jesus, who carried on the royal bloodline of Christ by giving birth to His child! The Priory guards the secret location of Mary's tomb and serves to protect the bloodline of Jesus that has continued to this day!

Does anyone take these ideas seriously? Yes; they do. This is partly due to the way the story is written. The first word one encounters in *The Da Vinci Code*, in bold uppercase letters, is the word "FACT." Shortly thereafter Brown writes, "All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate."[{5}](#) And the average reader, with no special knowledge in these areas, will assume the statement is true. But it's not, and many have documented some of Brown's inaccuracies in these areas.[{6}](#)

Brown also has a way of making the novel's theories about Jesus and the early church seem credible. The theories are espoused by the novel's most educated characters: a British royal historian, Leigh Teabing, and a Harvard professor, Robert Langdon. When put in the mouths of these characters,

one comes away with the impression that the theories are actually true. But are they?

In this article, I'll argue that most of what the novel says about Jesus, the Bible, and the history of the early church is simply false. I'll also say a bit about how this material can be used in evangelism.

Did Constantine Embellish Our Four Gospels?

Were the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, which were later to be officially recognized as part of the New Testament canon, intentionally embellished in the fourth century at the command of Emperor Constantine? This is what Leigh Teabing, the fictional historian in *The Da Vinci Code*, suggests. At one point he states, "Constantine commissioned and financed a new Bible, which omitted those gospels that spoke of Christ's human traits and embellished those gospels that made Him godlike" (234). Is this true?

In a letter to the church historian Eusebius, Constantine did indeed order the preparation of "fifty copies of the sacred Scriptures."[\[7\]](#) But nowhere in the letter does he command that any of the Gospels be embellished in order to make Jesus appear more godlike. And even if he had, it would have been virtually impossible to get faithful Christians to accept such accounts.

Before the reign of Constantine, the church suffered great persecution under Emperor Diocletian. It's hard to believe that the same church that had withstood this persecution would jettison their cherished Gospels and embrace embellished accounts of Jesus' life! It's also virtually certain that had Constantine tried such a thing, we'd have lots of evidence for it in the writings of the church fathers. But we have none. Not one of them mentions an attempt by Constantine to alter

any of our Gospels. And finally, to claim that the leaders of the fourth century church, many of whom had suffered persecution for their faith in Christ, would agree to join Constantine in a conspiracy of this kind is completely unrealistic.

One last point. We have copies of the four Gospels that are significantly earlier than Constantine and the Council of Nicaea (or Nicea). Although none of the copies are complete, we do have nearly complete copies of both Luke and John in a codex dated between A.D. 175 and 225—at least a hundred years before Nicaea. Another manuscript, dating from about A.D. 200 or earlier, contains most of John's Gospel.[\[8\]](#) But why is this important?

First, we can compare these pre-Nicene manuscripts with those that followed Nicaea to see if any embellishment occurred. None did. Second, the pre-Nicene versions of John's Gospel include some of the strongest declarations of Jesus' deity on record (e.g. 1:1-3; 8:58; 10:30-33). That is, the most explicit declarations of Jesus' deity in any of our Gospels are already found in manuscripts that pre-date Constantine by more than a hundred years!

If you have a non-Christian friend who believes these books were embellished, you might gently refer them to this evidence. Then, encourage them to read the Gospels for themselves and find out who Jesus really is.

But what if they think these sources can't be trusted?

Can We Trust the Gospels?

Although there's no historical basis for the claim that Constantine embellished the New Testament Gospels to make Jesus appear more godlike, we must still ask whether the Gospels are reliable sources of information about Jesus. According to Teabing, the novel's fictional historian, "Almost

everything our fathers taught us about Christ is false" (235). Is this true? The answer largely depends on the reliability of our earliest biographies of Jesus—the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

Each of these Gospels was written in the first century A.D. Although they are technically anonymous, we have fairly strong evidence from second century writers such as Papias (c. A.D. 125) and Irenaeus (c. A.D. 180) for ascribing each Gospel to its traditional author. If their testimony is true (and we've little reason to doubt it), then Mark, the companion of Peter, wrote down the substance of Peter's preaching. And Luke, the companion of Paul, carefully researched the biography that bears his name. Finally, Matthew and John, two of Jesus' twelve disciples, wrote the books ascribed to them. If this is correct, then the events recorded in these Gospels "are based on either direct or indirect eyewitness testimony."[\[9\]](#)

But did the Gospel writers intend to reliably record the life and ministry of Jesus? Were they even interested in history, or did their theological agendas overshadow any desire they may have had to tell us what really happened? Craig Blomberg, a New Testament scholar, observes that the prologue to Luke's Gospel "reads very much like prefaces to other generally trusted historical and biographical works of antiquity." He further notes that since Matthew and Mark are similar to Luke in terms of genre, "it seems reasonable that Luke's historical intent would closely mirror theirs."[\[10\]](#) Finally, John tells us that he wrote his Gospel so that people might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing they might have life in His name (20:31). While this statement admittedly reveals a theological agenda, Blomberg points out that "if you're going to be convinced enough to believe, the theology has to flow from accurate history."[\[11\]](#)

Interestingly, the disciplines of history and archaeology are a great help in corroborating the general reliability of the Gospel writers. Where these authors mention people, places,

and events that can be checked against other ancient sources, they are consistently shown to be quite reliable. We need to let our non-Christian friends know that we have good grounds for trusting the New Testament Gospels and believing what they say about Jesus.

But what if they ask about those Gospels that didn't make it into the New Testament? Specifically, what if they ask about the Nag Hammadi documents?

The Nag Hammadi Documents

Since their discovery in 1945, there's been much interest in the Nag Hammadi texts. What are these documents? When were they written, and by whom, and for what purpose? According to Teabing, the historian in *The Da Vinci Code*, the Nag Hammadi texts represent "the earliest Christian records" (245). These "unaltered gospels," he claims, tell the real story about Jesus and early Christianity (248). The New Testament Gospels are allegedly a later, corrupted version of these events.

The only difficulty with Teabing's theory is that it's wrong. The Nag Hammadi documents are not "the earliest Christian records." Every book in the New Testament is earlier. The New Testament documents were all written in the first century A.D. By contrast, the dates for the Nag Hammadi texts range from the second to the third century A.D. As Darrell Bock observes in *Breaking The Da Vinci Code*, "The bulk of this material is a few generations removed from the foundations of the Christian faith, a vital point to remember when assessing the contents."[\[12\]](#)

What do we know about the contents of these books? It is generally agreed that the Nag Hammadi texts are Gnostic documents. The key tenet of Gnosticism is that salvation comes through secret knowledge. As a result, the Gnostic Gospels, in striking contrast to their New Testament counterparts, place

almost no value on the death and resurrection of Jesus. Indeed, Gnostic Christology had a tendency to separate the human Jesus from the divine Christ, seeing them as two distinct beings. It was not the divine Christ who suffered and died; it was merely the human Jesus—or perhaps even Simon of Cyrene.[\[13\]](#) It didn't matter much to the Gnostics because in their view the death of Jesus was irrelevant for attaining salvation. What was truly important was not the death of the man Jesus but the secret knowledge brought by the divine Christ. According to the Gnostics, salvation came through a correct understanding of this secret knowledge.[\[14\]](#)

Clearly these doctrines are incompatible with the New Testament teaching about Christ and salvation (e.g. Rom. 3:21-26; 5:1-11; 1 Cor. 15:3-11; Tit. 2:11-14). Ironically, they're also incompatible with Teabing's view that the Nag Hammadi texts "speak of Christ's ministry in very human terms" (234). The Nag Hammadi texts actually present Christ as a divine being, though quite differently from the New Testament perspective.[\[15\]](#)

Thus, the Nag Hammadi texts are both later than the New Testament writings and characterized by a worldview that is entirely alien to their theology. We must explain to our non-Christian friends that the church fathers exercised great wisdom in rejecting these books from the New Testament.

But what if they ask us how it was decided what books to include?

The Formation of the New Testament Canon

In the early centuries of Christianity, many books were written about the teachings of Jesus and His apostles. Most of these books never made it into the New Testament. They include such titles as The Gospel of Philip, The Acts of John, and The Apocalypse of Peter. How did the early church decide what

books to include in the New Testament and what to reject? When were these decisions made, and by whom? According to the Teabing, "The Bible, as we know it today, was collated by . . . Constantine the Great" (231). Is this true?

The early church had definite criteria that had to be met for a book to be included in the New Testament. As Bart Ehrman observes, a book had to be ancient, written close to the time of Jesus. It had to be written either by an apostle or a companion of an apostle. It had to be consistent with the orthodox understanding of the faith. And it had to be widely recognized and accepted by the church.[{16}](#) Books that didn't meet these criteria weren't included in the New Testament.

When were these decisions made? And who made them? There wasn't an ecumenical council in the early church that officially decreed that the twenty-seven books now in our New Testament were the right ones.[{17}](#) Rather, the canon gradually took shape as the church recognized and embraced those books that were inspired by God. The earliest collections of books "to circulate among the churches in the first half of the second century" were our four Gospels and the letters of Paul.[{18}](#) Not until the heretic Marcion published his expurgated version of the New Testament in about A.D. 144 did church leaders seek to define the canon more specifically.[{19}](#)

Toward the end of the second century there was a growing consensus that the canon should include the four Gospels, Acts, the thirteen Pauline epistles, "epistles by other 'apostolic men' and the Revelation of John."[{20}](#) The Muratorian Canon, which dates toward the end of the second century, recognized every New Testament book except Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, and 3 John. Similar though not identical books were recognized by Irenaeus in the late second century and Origen in the early third century. So while the earliest listing of all the books in our New Testament comes from Athanasius in A.D. 367, there was widespread agreement on most of these books (including the four Gospels) by the end of the

second century. By sharing this information “with gentleness and respect” (1 Pet. 3:15), we can help our friends see that the New Testament canon did not result from a decision by Constantine.

Who Was Mary Magdalene? (Part 1)

Mary Magdalene, of course, is a major figure in *The Da Vinci Code*. Let’s take a look at Mary, beginning by addressing the unfortunate misconception that she was a prostitute. Where did this notion come from? And why do so many people believe it?

According to Leigh Teabing, the popular understanding of Mary Magdalene as a prostitute “is the legacy of a smear campaign . . . by the early Church.” In Teabing’s view, “The Church needed to defame Mary . . . to cover up her dangerous secret—her role as the Holy Grail” (244). Remember, in this novel the Holy Grail is not the cup used by Jesus at the Last Supper. Instead it’s Mary Magdalene, who’s alleged to have been both Jesus’ wife and the one who carried His royal bloodline in her womb.

How should we respond to this? Did the early church really seek to slander Mary as a prostitute in order to cover up her intimate relationship with Jesus? The first recorded instance of Mary Magdalene being misidentified as a prostitute occurred in a sermon by Pope Gregory the Great in A.D. 591.[{21}](#) Most likely, this wasn’t a deliberate attempt to slander Mary’s character. Rather, Gregory probably misinterpreted some passages in the Gospels, resulting in his incorrectly identifying Mary as a prostitute.

For instance, he may have identified the unnamed sinful woman in Luke 7, who anointed Jesus’ feet, with Mary of Bethany in John 12, who also anointed Jesus’ feet shortly before His death. This would have been easy to do because, although there are differences, there are also many similarities between the

two separate incidents. If Gregory thought the sinful woman of Luke 7 was the Mary of John 12, he may then have mistakenly linked this woman with Mary Magdalene. Interestingly, Luke mentions Mary Magdalene for the first time at the beginning of chapter 8, right after the story of Jesus' anointing in Luke 7. Since the unnamed woman in Luke 7 was likely guilty of some kind of sexual sin, if Gregory thought this woman was Mary Magdalene, then it wouldn't be too great a leap to infer she was a prostitute.

If you're discussing the novel with someone who is hostile toward the church, don't be afraid to admit that the church has sometimes made mistakes. We can agree that Gregory was mistaken when he misidentified Mary as a prostitute. But we must also observe that it's quite unlikely that this was part of a smear campaign by the early church. We must remind our friends that Christians make mistakes—and even sin—just like everyone else (Rom. 3:23). The difference is that we've recognized our need for a Savior from sin. And in this respect, we're actually following in the footsteps of Mary Magdalene (John 20:1-18)!

Who Was Mary Magdalene? (Part 2)

What do our earliest written sources reveal about the real Mary Magdalene? According to Teabing, Mary was the wife of Jesus, the mother of His child, and the one whom He intended to establish the church after His death (244-48). In support of these theories, Teabing appeals to two of the Gnostic Gospels: The Gospel of Philip and The Gospel of Mary [Magdalene]. Let's look first at The Gospel of Mary.

The section of this Gospel quoted in the novel presents an incredulous apostle Peter who simply can't believe that the risen Christ has secretly revealed information to Mary that He didn't reveal to His male disciples. Levi rebukes Peter: "If the Saviour made her worthy, who are you . . . to reject her?"

Surely the Saviour knows her very well. That is why he loved her more than us" (247).

What can we say about this passage? First, we must observe that nowhere in this Gospel are we told that Mary was Jesus' wife or the mother of His child. Second, many scholars think this text should probably be read symbolically, with Peter representing early Christian orthodoxy and Mary representing a form of Gnosticism. This Gospel is probably claiming that "Mary" (that is, the Gnostics) has received divine revelation, even if "Peter" (that is, the orthodox) can't believe it.[{22}](#) Finally, even if this text should be read literally, we have little reason to think it's historically reliable. It was likely composed sometime in the late second century, about a hundred years after the canonical Gospels.[{23}](#) So, contrary to what's implied in the novel, it certainly wasn't written by Mary Magdalene—or any of Jesus' other original followers.[{24}](#)

If we want reliable information about Mary, we must turn to our earliest sources—the New Testament Gospels. These sources tell us that Mary was a follower of Jesus from the town of Magdala. After Jesus cast seven demons out of her, she (along with other women) helped support His ministry (Luke 8:1-3). She witnessed Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection, and was the first to see the risen Christ (Matt. 27:55-61; John 20:11-18). Jesus even entrusted her with proclaiming His resurrection to His male disciples (John 20:17-18). In this sense, Mary was an "apostle" to the apostles.[{25}](#) This is all the Gospels tell us about Mary.[{26}](#) We can agree with our non-Christian friends that she was a very important woman. But we must also remind them that there's nothing to suggest that she was Jesus' wife, or that He intended her to lead the church.

All this aside, someone who's read *The Da Vinci Code* might still have questions about The Gospel of Philip? Doesn't this text indicate that Mary and Jesus were married?

Was Jesus Married? (Part 1)

Undoubtedly, the strongest textual evidence that Jesus was married comes from The Gospel of Philip. So it's not surprising that Leigh Teabing, should appeal to this text. The section of this Gospel quoted in the novel reads as follows:

And the companion of the Saviour is Mary Magdalene. Christ loved her more than all the disciples and used to kiss her often on her mouth. The rest of the disciples were offended by it and expressed disapproval. They said to him, "Why do you love her more than all of us?" (246).

Now, notice that the first line refers to Mary as the companion of the Savior. In the novel, Teabing clinches his argument that Jesus and Mary were married by stating, "As any Aramaic scholar will tell you, the word companion, in those days, literally meant spouse" (246). This sounds pretty convincing. Was Jesus married after all?

When discussing this issue with a non-Christian friend, point out that we must proceed carefully here. The Gospel of Philip was originally written in Greek.[{27}](#) Therefore, what the term "companion" meant in Aramaic is entirely irrelevant. Even in the Coptic translation found at Nag Hammadi, a Greek loan word (*koinonos*) lies behind the term translated "companion". Darrell Bock observes that this is "not the typical . . . term for 'wife'" in Greek.[{28}](#) Indeed, *koinonos* is most often used in the New Testament to refer to a "partner." Luke uses the term to describe James and John as Peter's business partners (Luke 5:10). So contrary to the claim of Teabing, the statement that Mary was Jesus' companion does not at all prove that she was His wife.

But what about the following statement: "Christ loved her . . . and used to kiss her often on her mouth"?

First, this portion of the manuscript is damaged. We don't actually know where Christ kissed Mary. There's a hole in the manuscript at that place. Some believe that "she was kissed on her cheek or forehead since either term fits in the break."[\[29\]](#) Second, even if the text said that Christ kissed Mary on her mouth, it wouldn't necessarily mean that something sexual is in view. Most scholars agree that Gnostic texts contain a lot of symbolism. To read such texts literally, therefore, is to misread them. Finally, regardless of the author's intention, this Gospel wasn't written until the second half of the third century, over two hundred years after the time of Jesus.[\[30\]](#) So the reference to Jesus kissing Mary is almost certainly not historically reliable.

We must show our non-Christian friends that The Gospel of Philip offers insufficient evidence that Jesus was married. But what if they've bought into the novel's contention that it would have been odd for Jesus to be single?

Was Jesus Married? (Part 2)

The two most educated characters in *The Da Vinci Code* claim that an unmarried Jesus is quite improbable. Leigh Teabing says, "Jesus as a married man makes infinitely more sense than our standard biblical view of Jesus as a bachelor" (245). Robert Langdon, Harvard professor of Religious Symbolology, concurs:

Jesus was a Jew, and the social decorum during that time virtually forbid a Jewish man to be unmarried. According to Jewish custom, celibacy was condemned. . . . If Jesus were not married, at least one of the Bible's Gospels would have mentioned it and offered some explanation for His unnatural state of bachelorhood (245).

Is this true? What if our non-Christian friends want a response to such claims?

In his excellent book *Breaking The Da Vinci Code*, Darrell Bock persuasively argues that an unmarried Jesus is not at all improbable.^{31} Of course, it's certainly true that most Jewish men of Jesus' day did marry. It's also true that marriage was often viewed as a fundamental human obligation, especially in light of God's command to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (Gen. 1:28). Nevertheless, by the first century there were recognized, and even lauded, exceptions to this general rule.

The first century Jewish writer, Philo of Alexandria, described the Essenes as those who "repudiate marriage . . . for no one of the Essenes ever marries a wife."^{32} Interestingly, the Essenes not only escaped condemnation for their celibacy, they were often admired. Philo also wrote, "This now is the enviable system of life of these Essenes, so that not only private individuals but even mighty kings, admiring the men, venerate their sect, and increase . . . the honors which they confer on them."^{33} Such citations clearly reveal that not all Jews of Jesus' day considered marriage obligatory. And those who sought to avoid marriage for religious reasons were often admired rather than condemned.

It may be helpful to remind your friend that the Bible nowhere condemns singleness. Indeed, it praises those who choose to remain single to devote themselves to the work of the Lord (e.g. 1 Cor. 7:25-38). Point your friend to Matthew 19:12, where Jesus explains that some people "have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven" (NIV). Notice His conclusion, "The one who can accept this should accept it." It's virtually certain that Jesus had accepted this. He had renounced marriage to fully devote Himself to the work of His heavenly Father. What's more, since there was precedent in the first century for Jewish men to remain single for religious reasons, Jesus' singleness would not have been condemned. Let

your friend know that, contrary to the claims of *The Da Vinci Code*, it would have been completely acceptable for Jesus to be unmarried.

Did Jesus' Earliest Followers Proclaim His Deity?

We've considered *The Da Vinci Code*'s claim that Jesus was married and found it wanting. Mark Roberts observed "that most proponents of the marriage of Jesus thesis have an agenda. They are trying to strip Jesus of his uniqueness, and especially his deity."[{34}](#) This is certainly true of *The Da Vinci Code*. Not only does it call into question Jesus' deity by alleging that He was married, it also maintains that His earliest followers never even believed He was divine! According to Teabing, the doctrine of Christ's deity originally resulted from a vote at the Council of Nicaea. He further asserts, "until that moment in history, Jesus was viewed by His followers as a mortal prophet . . . a great and powerful man, but a man nonetheless" (233). Did Jesus' earliest followers really believe that He was just a man? If our non-Christian friends have questions about this, let's view it as a great opportunity to tell them who Jesus really is!

The Council of Nicaea met in A.D. 325. By then, Jesus' followers had been proclaiming His deity for nearly three centuries. Our earliest written sources about the life of Jesus are found in the New Testament. These first century documents repeatedly affirm the deity of Christ. For instance, in his letter to the Colossians, the apostle Paul declared, "For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form" (2:9; see also Rom. 9:5; Phil. 2:5-11; Tit. 2:13). And John wrote, "In the beginning was the Word . . . and the Word was God . . . And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us" (1:1, 14).

There are also affirmations of Jesus' deity in the writings of the pre-Nicene church fathers. In the early second century, Ignatius of Antioch wrote of "our God, Jesus the Christ."[\[35\]](#) Similar affirmations can be found throughout these writings. There's even non-Christian testimony from the second century that Christians believed in Christ's divinity. Pliny the Younger wrote to Emperor Trajan, around A.D. 112, that the early Christians "were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day . . . when they sang . . . a hymn to Christ, as to a god."[\[36\]](#)

If we humbly share this information with our non-Christian friends, we can help them see that Christians believed in Christ's deity long before the Council of Nicaea. We might even be able to explain why Christians were so convinced of His deity that they were willing to die rather than deny it. If so, we can invite our friends to believe in Jesus for themselves. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

Notes

1. Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).
2. See Dan Brown's official website at www.danbrown.com/meet_dan/ (February 1, 2006).
3. See the Sony Pictures website at www.sonypictures.com/movies/thedavincicode/ (February 1, 2006).
4. More information is available about the series at www.probe.org.
5. Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, 1.
6. For example, see Sandra Miesel, "Dismantling The Da Vinci Code," at www.crisismagazine.com/september2003/feature1.htm and James Patrick Holding, "Not InDavincible: A Review and Critique of The Da Vinci Code," at www.answers.org/issues/davincicode.html.
7. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene*

Fathers (Reprint. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1952), 1:549, cited in Norman Geisler and William Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible: Revised and Expanded* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 282.

8. For more information see Geisler and Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, 390.

9. Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1998), 25.

10. Ibid., 39-40.

11. Ibid., 40.

12. Darrell Bock, *Breaking The Da Vinci Code* (n.p.: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2004), 52 (pre-publication manuscript copy).

13. Ibid., 62-63. See also *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter and The Second Treatise of the Great Seth* in Bart Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It Into The New Testament*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 78-86.

14. For example, *The Coptic Gospel of Thomas* (saying 1), in Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures*, 20.

15. Bock, *Breaking The Da Vinci Code*, 63.

16. Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: Christian Scriptures and the Battles Over Authentication* (Chantilly, Virginia: The Teaching Company: Course Guidebook, part 2, 2002), 37.

17. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures*, 341.

18. F.F. Bruce, "Canon," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight and I. Howard Marshall, eds. (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 95.

19. Ibid., 95-96.

20. Ibid., 96.

21. Darrell Bock, *Breaking The Da Vinci Code* (n.p. Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2004), 25-26 (pre-publication manuscript copy). I have relied heavily on Dr. Bock's analysis in this section.

22. Ibid., 116-17.

23. Bart Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures*, 35.

24. Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*. On page 247 we read, "Sophie had not known a gospel existed in Magdalene's words."

25. An “apostle” can simply refer to “one sent” as an envoy or messenger. Mary was an “apostle” in this sense, since she was sent by Jesus to tell the disciples of His resurrection.
26. For more information see Bock, *Breaking The Da Vinci Code*, 16-18.
27. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures*, 19.
28. Bock, *Breaking The Da Vinci Code*, 22.
29. Ibid., 21.
30. Ibid., 20.
31. In this section I have relied heavily on chapter 3 of Bock, *Breaking The Da Vinci Code*, pp. 40-49 (pre-publication copy).
32. Philo, *Hypothetica*, 11.14-17, cited in Bock, *Breaking The Da Vinci Code*, 43.
33. Ibid., 44.
34. Mark D. Roberts, “Was Jesus Married? A Careful Look at the Real Evidence,” at www.markdroberts.com/htmlfiles/resources/jesusmarried.htm, January, 2004.
35. Ignatius of Antioch, “Ephesians,” 18:2, cited in Jack N. Sparks, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. Robert M. Grant (New York: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1978), 83.
36. Pliny, *Letters*, transl. by William Melmoth, rev. by W.M.L. Hutchinson (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1935), vol. II, X:96, cited in Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 199.