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.

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.

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 websurfers 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 websurfers: 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.

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&edash;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”?

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 likechannels 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).

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?

“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.

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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 Symbology, 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/htmfiles/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.

Crime and Punishment – A

Christian View of Dostoevsky's Classic Novel

Michael Gleghorn looks at the famous novel through a Christian worldview lens to see what truths Dostoevsky may have for us. We learn that this great novel records the fall of man into a degraded state but ends with the beginning of his restoration through the ministry of a selfless, Christian woman.

Introduction and Overview

In 1866 the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky published *Crime and Punishment*, one of his greatest novels. It's a penetrating study of the psychology of sin, guilt, and redemption, and it haunts the reader long after the final page has been read. It tells the story of an intelligent, but impoverished, young Russian intellectual named Raskolnikov. Under the unfortunate influence of a particularly pernicious theory of society and human nature, he exalts himself above the moral law, grievously transgresses it by committing two murders, "and plunges into a hell of persecution, madness and terror."{1}

Raskolnikov had conceived of himself as a great and extraordinary man, on the order of a Napoleon. He tried to convince himself that he wasn't bound by the same tired old moral code that the vast mass of humanity lives in recognition of, if not obedience to—the merely *ordinary* men and women who accomplish little and amount to less. Nevertheless, after committing his horrible crime, he finds that he cannot escape his punishment: he cannot silence his sensitive and overburdened conscience. In the end, when he can stand it no longer, he decides to confess his crime and accept suffering as a means of atonement.

Joseph Frank observes that Dostoevsky, the author of this story, had "long been preoccupied with the question of crime

and conscience."{2} In one of his letters, Dostoevsky describes his story as the "psychological report of a crime."{3} The crime is committed, he says, by "a young man, expelled from the university . . . and living in the midst of the direst poverty." Coming under the influence of "the strange, 'unfinished' ideas that float in the atmosphere," he decides to murder an old pawnbroker and steal her money. Dostoevsky describes the old woman as "stupid and ailing," "greedy" and "evil." Why, it would hardly be a crime at all to murder such a wretched person! What's more, with the money from his crime, the young man can "finish his studies, go abroad," and devote the rest of his life to the benefit of humanity!

Inspired by these thoughts, the young man goes through with the crime and murders the old woman. But, notes Dostoevsky, "here is where the entire psychological process of the crime is unfolded. Insoluble problems confront the murderer, unsuspected and unexpected feelings torment his heart . . . and he finishes by *being forced* to denounce himself."

This, in brief, is the story of *Crime and Punishment*. In what follows, we'll take a closer look at the theory which led Raskolnikov to commit his crime. Then we'll consider why the theory proved false when Raskolnikov actually attempted to put it into practice.

The Ordinary and Extraordinary

Raskolnikov committed two murders, in part simply to see if he really has the bravado to put his theories into practice. But what are these ideas? Where do they come from? And why do they lead Raskolnikov to such heinous actions?

Essentially, Raskolnikov's theory, which was partially developed in an article on crime that he had written, holds that all men, by a kind of law of nature, are divided into two

distinct classes: the *ordinary* and the *extraordinary*. This theory, which finds some of its philosophical roots in the writings of men like Hegel and Nietzsche, claims that ordinary men exist merely for the purpose of reproduction by which, at length, the occasional, extraordinary man might arise. Raskolnikov declares, "The vast mass of mankind is mere material, and only exists in order by some great effort, by some mysterious process, by means of some crossing of races and stocks, to bring into the world at last perhaps one man out of a thousand with a spark of independence." The man of genius is rarer still, "and the great geniuses, the crown of humanity, appear on earth perhaps one in many thousand millions."{4}

The distinctive features of the ordinary man are a conservative temperament and a law-abiding disposition. But extraordinary men "all transgress the law." Indeed, says Raskolnikov, "if such a one is forced for the sake of his idea to step over a corpse or wade through blood, he can . . . find . . . in his own conscience, a sanction for wading through blood."{5} So the extraordinary man has the right—indeed, depending on the value of his ideas, he may even have the duty—to destroy those who stand in his way. After all, Raskolnikov observes, such ideas may benefit "the whole of humanity."{6} But how can we know if we are merely ordinary men, or whether, perhaps, we are extraordinary? How can we know if we have the *right* to transgress the law to achieve our own ends?

Raskolnikov admits that confusion regarding one's class is indeed possible. But he thinks "the mistake can only arise . . . among the ordinary people" who sometimes like to imagine themselves more advanced than they really are. And we needn't worry much about that, for such people are "very conscientious" and will impose "public acts of penitence upon themselves with a beautiful and edifying effect."{7}

But as we'll see, it's one of the ironies of this novel that

Raskolnikov, who committed murder because he thought himself extraordinary, made precisely this tragic mistake.

A Walking Contradiction

James Roberts observes that Raskolnikov "is best seen as two characters. He sometimes acts in one manner and then suddenly in a manner completely contradictory."{8} Evidence for this can be seen throughout the novel. In this way, Dostoevsky makes clear, right from the beginning of his story, that Raskolnikov is *not* an extraordinary man, at least not in the sense in which Raskolnikov himself uses that term in his theory of human nature.

In the opening pages of the novel, we see Raskolnikov at war with himself as he debates his intention to murder an old pawnbroker. "I want to attempt a thing *like that*," he says to himself.{9} Then, after visiting the old woman's flat, ostensibly to pawn a watch, but in reality as a sort of "dress rehearsal" for the murder, he again questions himself: "How could such an atrocious thing come into my head? What filthy things my heart is capable of. Yes, filthy above all . . . loathsome!"{10}

This inner battle suggests that Raskolnikov has mistaken himself for an *extraordinary* man, a man bound neither by the rules of society, nor the higher moral law. But in fact, he's actually just a conscientious *ordinary* man. The portrait Dostoevsky paints of him is really quite complex. He often appears to be a sensitive, though confused, young intellectual, who's been led to entertain his wild ideas more as a result of dire poverty and self-imposed isolation from his fellow man, rather than from sheer malice or selfish ambition.

In fear and trembling he commits two murders, partly out of a confused desire to thereby benefit the rest of humanity, and

partly out of a seemingly genuine concern to really live in accordance with his theories. Ironically, while the murders are partly committed with the idea of taking the old pawnbroker's money to advance Raskolnikov's plans, he never attempts to use the money, but merely buries it under a stone. What's more, Raskolnikov is portrayed as one of the more generous characters in the novel. On more than one occasion, he literally gives away all the money he has to help meet the needs of others. Finally, while Raskolnikov is helped toward confessing his crime through the varied efforts of Porfiry Petrovich, the brilliant, yet compassionate, criminal investigator, and Sonia, the humble, selfless prostitute, nevertheless, it's primarily Raskolnikov's own tormented conscience that, at length, virtually forces him to confess to the murders.

So while Raskolnikov is guilty, he's not completely lost. He still retains a conscience, as well as some degree of genuine compassion toward others. Dostoevsky wants us to see that there's still hope for Raskolnikov!

The Hope of Restoration

After Raskolnikov commits the two murders, he finds himself confronted with the desperate need to be reconciled with God and his fellow man. From the beginning of the story, Raskolnikov is portrayed as somewhat alienated from his fellows. But once he commits the murders, he experiences a decisive break, both spiritually and psychologically, from the rest of humanity. Indeed, when he murders the old pawnbroker and her sister, something within Raskolnikov also dies. The bond that unites him with all other men in a common humanity is destroyed—or "dies"—as a sort of poetic justice for murdering the two women.

This death, which separates Raskolnikov both from God and his fellow man, can only be reversed through a miracle of divine

grace and power. In the novel, the biblical paradigm for this great miracle is the story of the raising of Lazarus. Just as Lazarus died, and was then restored to life through the miraculous power of God in Christ, so also, in Dostoevsky's story, Raskolnikov's "death" is neither permanent nor irreversible. He too can be "restored to life." He too can be reconciled with God and man.

While this theme of death and restoration to life is somewhat subtle, nevertheless, Dostoevsky probably intended it as one of the primary themes of the novel. In the first place, it is emphasized by Sonia, Porfiry Petrovich, and Raskolnikov's own sister, that only by confessing his crime and accepting his punishment can Raskolnikov again be *restored* to the rest of humanity. In this way, Dostoevsky repeatedly emphasizes the "death" of Raskolnikov.

In addition, the raising of Lazarus is mentioned at least three times in the novel. One time is when, in the midst of a heated discussion, Porfiry specifically asks Raskolnikov if he believes in the raising of Lazarus, to which Raskolnikov responds that he does.{11} This affirmation foreshadows some hope for Raskolnikov, for the fact that he believes in this miracle at least makes possible the belief that God can also work a miracle in his own life. Secondly, the only extended portion of Scripture cited in the novel relates the story of Lazarus. In fact, it's Raskolnikov himself, tormented by what he's done, who asks Sonia to read him the story.{12} Finally, at the end of the novel, the raising of Lazarus is mentioned yet again, this time as Raskolnikov recollects Sonia's previous reading of the story to him.{13} Interestingly, this final reference to the raising of Lazarus occurs in the context of Raskolnikov's own "restoration to life."

Restored to Life

Near the end of the novel, Raskolnikov at last goes to the

police station and confesses to the murders: *"It was I killed the old pawnbroker woman and her sister Lizaveta with an axe and robbed them."*{14} He is sentenced to eight years in a Siberian labor prison. Sonia, true to her promise, selflessly follows him there. Early one morning she comes to visit Raskolnikov. Overcome with emotion, he begins weeping and throws himself at her feet. Sonia is terrified. "But at the same moment she understood . . . . She knew . . . that he loved her . . . and that at last the moment had come."{15} God's love, mediated through Sonia, had finally broken through to Raskolnikov: "He had risen again and he . . . felt in it all his being."{16}

Although Raskolnikov had previously been something of an outcast with his fellow inmates, nevertheless, on the day of his "restoration," his relations with them begin to improve. Dostoevsky writes:

> *He . . . fancied that day that all the convicts who had been his enemies looked at him differently; he had even entered into talk with them and they answered him in a friendly way. He remembered that now, and thought it was bound to be so. Wasn't everything now bound to be changed?{17}*

What's more, Dostoevsky also implies that Raskolnikov is being restored to relationship with God. Picking up the New Testament that Sonia had given him, "one thought passed through his mind: 'Can her convictions not be mine now? Her feelings, her aspirations at least . . .'"{18} And Dostoevsky then concludes his great novel by stating: "But that is the beginning of a new story—the story of the gradual renewal of a man, the story of his gradual regeneration, of his passing from one world into another, of his initiation into a new unknown life."{19}

So by the end of the novel, Raskolnikov, as a type of Lazarus, has experienced his own "restoration to life." He is ready to

begin “his initiation into a new unknown life.” And interestingly, the grace which brings about Raskolnikov’s restoration is primarily mediated to him through the quiet, humble love of Sonia, a prostitute. Just as God was not ashamed to have his own Son, humanly speaking, descended from some who were murderers and some who were prostitutes—for it was just such people He came to save—so also, in Dostoevsky’s story, God is not ashamed to extend His forgiveness and grace to a prostitute, and through her to a murderer as well. *Crime and Punishment* thus ends on a note of hope, for the guilty can be forgiven and the dead restored to life!

Notes

1. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Bantam Books, 1987). Citation from cover blurb on back of book.
2. Joseph Frank, “Introduction” to Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, ix.
3. The citations from Dostoevsky’s letter come from Joseph Frank’s “Introduction” to Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment,* viii-ix.
4. Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, 229.
5. Ibid., 227.
6. Ibid., 226.
7. Ibid., 228.
8. James Roberts, *Cliffs Notes on Dostoevsky’s Crime and Punishment*, ed. Gary Carey (Lincoln, Nebraska: Cliffs Notes, Inc.), 70.
9. Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, 2.
10. Ibid., 7.
11. Ibid., 227.
12. Ibid., 283.
13. Ibid., 472.
14. Ibid., 458.
15. Ibid., 471.
16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., 472.
19. Ibid.

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe: Reflections on Its Meaning

A Very Brief Overview

With the recent release of the movie *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the public fascination with all things "Narnian" has once again been raised. But what are we to make of this wonderful story? What deeper truths might it contain?

In order to answer these questions, we must begin with a very brief overview of the story. Four children—Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy—are evacuated from London to the house of an old professor during World War II. Once there, they soon discover a magic wardrobe that leads to another world! First Lucy, then Lucy and Edmund, and then all four of the children find their way into the enchanted land of Narnia. The country is ruled by the White Witch, who has placed it under a spell so that it's always winter but never Christmas.

Once in Narnia the children learn of Aslan, the great lion and true king of the country. After a long absence, he's now returned. He will deal with the Witch, they're told, and put everything right again. They also learn of an ancient

prophecy, that when two Sons of Adam and two Daughters of Eve sit enthroned at the castle of Cair Paravel, then the Witch's reign (as well as her life) will be over. It's believed that the time for this must be near, since Aslan and the four children are now in Narnia.

But Edmund threatens to ruin everything. Unbeknownst to the others, on a previous visit to Narnia he'd met the Witch, eaten her food, and come under her power. Although he really knows that the Witch is bad, he nonetheless betrays his siblings, hoping the Witch will one day make him king. Knowing about the prophecy, however, she eventually decides to kill Edmund. But before she can do so, he's rescued by forces loyal to Aslan!

Not to be outdone, the Witch then appears before Aslan, demanding the traitor's life. Aslan acknowledges the validity of the Witch's claim on a now repentant Edmund, but gets her to renounce it by offering to die in his place. The Witch agrees, and that night she slays Aslan on the Stone Table. She believes her rule in Narnia is now assured. But with the rising of the sun, Aslan rises from the dead! He leads his army to victory against the Witch and her forces. After personally dispatching the Witch, he installs the four children as kings and queens of Narnia, thus fulfilling the ancient prophecy.

This, in a nutshell, is the story. But did the author, C. S. Lewis, intend some deeper meaning? And if so, what is it?

The Search for a Deeper Meaning

It seems that Lewis had at least three objectives in writing his famous *Chronicles*. First, he simply wanted to tell a good story. And almost everyone who's read the *Chronicles* will agree that he succeeded admirably here, for they're among the best-loved books of all time. Second, Lewis also aimed at

using his stories to communicate moral truth, both by precept and example. In this regard, Paul Ford observes that Lewis is something of a Christian Aesop. Like Aesop, he's more than *just* a storyteller; he's "also a moral educator."{1} As Gilbert Meilaender notes:

> *Lewis . . . believes that moral principles are learned indirectly from others around us, who serve as exemplars. . . . . the Chronicles of Narnia . . . are not just good stories . . . they serve to enhance moral education, to build character. . . . To overlook the function of the Chronicles of Narnia in communicating images of proper emotional responses is to miss their connection to Lewis's moral thought.{2}*

Finally, Lewis also purposed to communicate important truths of the Christian faith by translating them into the imaginary landscape of Narnia. But here we must be careful. Lewis insisted that the *Chronicles* should not be read as Christian allegories. Paul Ford observes that in an allegory there are "one-to-one correspondences between philosophical or religious concepts and the characters or events or objects in a story."{3} The *Chronicles,* said Lewis, are not allegories. They're rather what he called "supposals." He explained the difference in a letter, with special reference to the great lion Aslan:

> *[Aslan] is an invention giving an imaginary answer to the question, 'What might Christ become like, if there really were a world like Narnia and He chose to be incarnate and die and rise again in that world as He actually has done in ours?' This is not an allegory at all. . . . The incarnation of Christ in another world is mere supposal.{4}*

So while the *Chronicles* should not be read as allegories, it's still quite true that they're informed throughout by Lewis's Christian faith and imagination. They are Christian

“supposals”—and Aslan is *supposed* to be what Christ *might* look like if He became incarnate in a land like Narnia.

Having discussed Lewis’s purposes in writing the *Chronicles*, and having seen that they do indeed contain a deeper meaning, we’re now ready to look more closely at the most famous of these: *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

Temptation and Sin

Two of the major themes developed by Lewis are temptation and sin. By carefully weaving these into his story, Lewis is able to address issues of importance both for basic morality and for the Christian faith.

When Edmund first stumbles into Narnia through the wardrobe, he finds himself alone in a snow-covered wood. Cold, and not much liking the look of the place, he almost decides to go home when he hears the sound of bells in the distance. Shortly thereafter a sleigh comes into view, and in it sits the White Witch.

The Witch stops the sleigh and questions Edmund. She knows of the ancient prophecy that, when two Sons of Adam and two Daughters of Eve sit enthroned at Cair Paravel, then her reign (and life) will be over. When she learns that Edmund is human, she raises her wand as if she intends to turn him into stone. But she changes her mind and with feigned friendliness invites Edmund to sit in her sleigh. She asks if he would like something to eat and Edmund requests Turkish Delight (which she magically produces).

As he devours the sweets, the Witch continues to question him. She learns that he has a brother and two sisters. Together, the siblings could fulfill the prophecy that would spell her doom! But the Turkish Delight is enchanted; whoever tastes it will want more and more. Knowing this, the Witch tempts Edmund. She says that if he will bring his siblings to her

house, then she will give him more Turkish Delight—something Edmund desperately wants. She also says that she would like to make Edmund a prince. And later, when she's gone, he will even be king! So the Witch tempts him by appealing to his desire for power and pleasure.

And it works! Before Edmund returns home, "he [is] already more than half on the side of the Witch."{5} Later, when all four siblings get into Narnia together, Edmund slips away from the others and goes to betray them to the Witch. His desire for Turkish Delight and to be king leads him to yield to temptation—and sin. It reminds one of what James says in the New Testament: "But each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death" (1:14-15).

Though we might not like to admit it, there's something of Edmund in all of us. Like Edmund, we've all sinned (Rom. 3:23). And unless Someone intervenes who can change both us and our circumstances, then like Edmund we're also doomed to die (Rom. 6:23; Rev. 20:14-15).

Sacrifice and Redemption

Lewis claimed that the idea for his story, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, "all began with a picture of a Faun carrying an umbrella and parcels in a snowy wood." "At first," he wrote, "I had very little idea how the story would go. But then suddenly Aslan came bounding into it. . . . [and] He pulled the whole story together."{6} It's a good thing He did. For without Aslan the traitorous Edmund would have met a very different fate than that which actually befell him.

You see, Aslan's Father, the great Emperor-Beyond-the-Sea, put some Deep Magic into Narnia at its beginning. The Witch, who accuses Edmund before Aslan, is quite knowledgeable about this

Deep Magic. “Every traitor,” she insists, “belongs to me as my lawful prey. . . . Unless I have blood as the Law says all Narnia will . . . perish in fire and water.”{7} Aslan agrees that her claim is valid.

Although it looks like Edmund is as good as dead, Aslan, in a private conversation with the Witch, gets her to renounce her claim on Edmund’s blood. It’s only later that we learn why. The great lion made the Witch an offer she couldn’t refuse. He offered to die in Edmund’s place. True to His word, He arrives that night at the Stone Table and there He is slain by the Witch.

But that’s not the end of the story. Early the next morning, as the sun peers over the horizon, the Stone Table cracks in two and Aslan is raised from the dead. He’s conquered death through an even Deeper Magic, unknown to the Witch. As Aslan explains, “Her knowledge goes back only to the dawn of Time. But if she could have looked . . . into . . . the darkness before Time dawned . . . She would have known that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor’s stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backwards.”{8}

It’s a beautiful picture of substitutionary atonement. Aslan willingly lays down His life for the traitorous Edmund, thereby redeeming him from the just demands of the Law. It reminds one of what Christ did for us. Paul told the Galatians, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree'” (Gal. 3:13). Just as Aslan gave up His life for Edmund, so Christ gave up His life for each of us, dying as a substitute in our place so that we might forever share in the life of God!

Reflections on the Movie

As many fans of Lewis's classic story *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* have already observed, the movie is really quite good and well worth seeing. It is a generally faithful rendition of Lewis's beautiful and imaginative original. Indeed the film is really at its best when it adheres most closely to the book. It was reported that at one time another group of filmmakers was planning to produce a very different version of the story. Supposedly their plan was to set Lewis's wonderful children's classic "in present-day Brentwood. Instead of a White Witch wooing young Edmund with Turkish Delight, a cool Californian would win him with cheeseburgers."{9} If this is really true, we can all rejoice that such an absurd retelling of Lewis's famous story never saw the light of day. All those involved with bringing *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* to the big screen are to be commended for adhering so closely to Lewis's original vision.

But of course no movie is perfect, and *The Lion* is no exception. Possibly two of the biggest disappointments for fans of the book are the diminished role given to some of Lewis's most important dialogue and the diminished importance of the great lion himself. For example, compared to his counterpart in the book, wise old professor Kirke has precious little to say in the movie.

Even more troubling, the extended conversation which the four children have with Mr. and Mrs. Beaver about Aslan lacks many of the Beavers' most important declarations. Unlike the book, the movie never refers to Aslan as "the son of the great Emperor-Beyond-the-Sea." And Mr. Beaver is also denied his famous response to Lucy's question about whether Aslan is actually safe. "Safe?" he asks, "Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."{10} Not only was such important dialogue cut, but as Jeffrey Overstreet noted, Aslan's appearances are "painfully

brief." He doesn't "have the time onscreen to earn our affection and awe the way we might have hoped."{11}

In spite of such shortcomings, however, the movie still possesses much of the book's magic. What's more, it retains the crucially important themes of temptation and sin, sacrifice and redemption. Aslan still dies as a substitute for the traitorous Edmund, thereby redeeming him from the just demands of the Law. Finally, as Overstreet observed, "Those who respond to the movie's roar by running to Lewis's book will find Deeper Magic in its pages. Meeting them there, Lewis himself will lead them 'further up, further in'."{12} If the movie leads a new generation of readers to tackle this classic story, then it will indeed have served as a fitting tribute to its author.

Notes

1. Paul F. Ford, "Introduction," in *Companion to Narnia* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994), xxviii.

2.Gilbert Meilaender, The Taste for the Other (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 212-13, cited in Ford, *Companion to Narnia*, xxxi.

3. Ford, *Companion to Narnia*, xxv.

4. C. S. Lewis, *Letters of C.S. Lewis*, ed. W.H. Lewis (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966), 283, cited in Ford, Companion to Narnia, xxv-xxvi.

5. C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (New York: Collier Books: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1970), 39.

6. C. S. Lewis, *Of Other Worlds*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1966), 42.

7. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, 139.

8. Ibid., 159-60.

9. Andrew Coffin, “The Chronicles of Making Narnia,” *World*, December 10, 2005, 21.

10. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, 75-76.

11. Jeffrey Overstreet, “The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe,” www.christianitytoday.com/movies/reviews/lionwitchwardrobe.html, posted December 8, 2005.

12. Ibid.