

Beware and prepare:

THE DA VINCI CODE arrives

BY JOHN W. KENNEDY



Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* returned to the top spot on fictional best-seller lists last month with the release of the paperback version and pre-movie publicity.

Christians had better spend this week brushing up on the Gospels, because co-workers, friends and neighbors are likely to pose plenty of questions about the authenticity of the Bible.

The Da Vinci Code opens Friday and industry analysts are predicting a blockbuster. Academy Award winning actor Tom Hanks is the star, Oscar winner Ron Howard is directing and Sony Pictures has rolled out an omnipresent marketing campaign.

The movie is based on Dan Brown's critically acclaimed book, which has spent more

than three years on best-seller lists. The novel, which already had more than 40 million hard-back copies in print, came out in paperback for the first time in March.

Come next week, it probably will be difficult for Christians to avoid inquisitive skeptics of the faith wanting to talk about the movie.

For Christians, the magnitude of the event is clear. On the one hand, the buzz around the movie presents an open door to explain the truths of the Bible to non-Christians who suddenly are interested. Yet there is a potentially greater risk:

Those suspicious of the church, as well as nominal Christians, may walk away from the faith.

HIT NOVEL

Even critics concede that the book version is a well-written page-turning mystery that is difficult to stop reading. It taps into culturally relevant themes such as secret societies, church scandals and feminism.

The story has a backdrop of

actual places such as the Louvre Museum in Paris plus historical figures such as Leonardo Da Vinci. On his own *Da Vinci Code* Web site, Brown says the "documents and secret rituals depicted in this novel all exist."

Yet *The Da Vinci Code* contains numerous inaccuracies, including claims that:

— Eighty gospels vied for New Testament canonization and the best accounts, the secret ones,

have been suppressed.

— Jesus didn't become deified until 325 at the Council of Nicaea.

— Jesus married Mary Magdalene, and fathered a child, Sarah, whose heirs are alive today.

— For nearly two millennia, the church has systematically eliminated the "sacred feminine" leadership designed to rightfully lead the faith.

With such a backdrop, massive confusion could be the fallout, according to Stephan K. Munsey, whose DVD documentary *Exposing the Da Vinci Code* is on sale everywhere from Barnes & Noble to Wal-Mart.

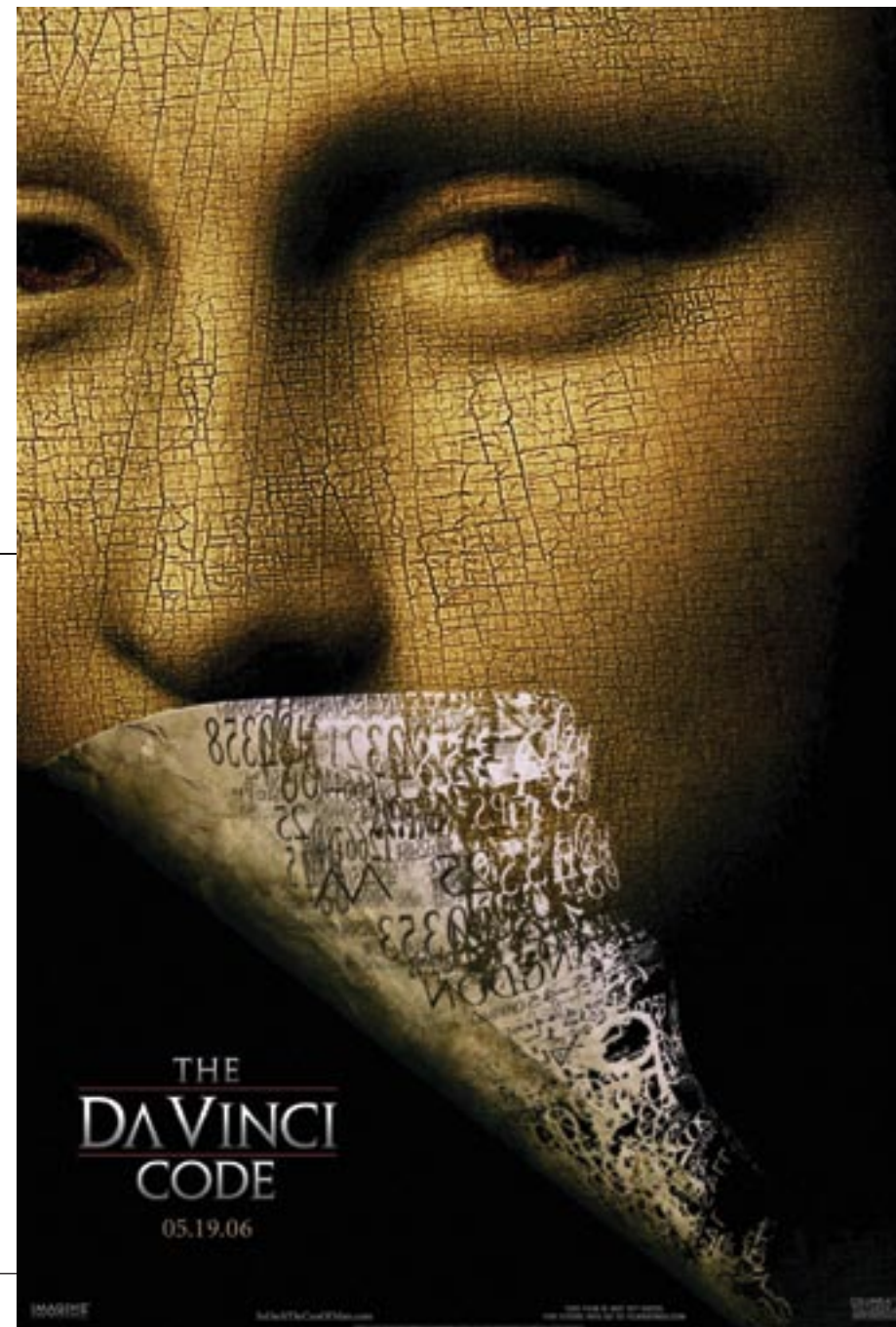
"Because people in the workplace are going to be asking questions, we as the church need to be prepared to give the answers," says Munsey, who lately has been in demand on the national talk show circuit. "Even though these ideas seem foolish to us who believe in the Bible, non-Christians will be wondering if this is true."

CHRISTIAN READERS

A survey last summer by Barna Research Group found that 18 percent of Protestants had read *The Da Vinci Code* cover to cover. Surprisingly, Barna says 53 percent of those polled indicated the book has been helpful in their "personal spiritual growth and understanding."

Ironically, many nominal Christians who haven't read the Bible in its entirety seem to be accepting Brown's suppositions as gospel.

"It really shows the lack of depth that many Christians have about the history of Christianity and the factual foundation for our faith," says Lee Strobel,



author of *The Case for Christ*. “Unfortunately, many Christians these days don’t know why they believe what they believe.”

“The way it is written, even born-again Christians will be tempted to say, ‘I wonder about this,’ ” says Munsey, senior pastor of Family Christian Center, a Munster, Ind., megachurch.

In addition to the Bible, there are plenty of materials to refute *The Da Vinci Code*. Strobel is one of more than a dozen evangelical Christians to write a book countering Brown’s claims.

Rather than protest the movie, Strobel and others concede that *The Da Vinci Code* is a cultural phenomenon. And instead of ignoring the film, Strobel urges Christians to be ready to explain New Testament truths in a rational way.

Strobel, a former investigative journalist, has co-authored *Exploring the Da Vinci Code* and an accompanying four-week DVD-driven discussion guide, *Discussing the Da Vinci Code*, for Christians to engage their non-Christian neighbors, friends and colleagues.

DEFLECTING CRITICISM

Sony Pictures Entertainment has anticipated protests from Christians and created a Web site (TheDaVinciChallenge.com) as a forum for critics. The site declares, “*The Da Vinci Code* is an entirely fictional thriller.”

While Sony’s objective may have been to fan the flames of controversy to create even more publicity about the movie, the site has allowed more than 30 Christian leaders such as

Strobel, Barna, Charles Colson and Josh McDowell to write uncensored essays critical of the film. Many are using the opportunity to present an unvarnished portrait of the real Jesus.

Christian apologists indeed see the movie as a threat to the faith. In his commentary on the Sony Web site, Barna predicts disaster for the unaware masses.

“Entering theaters essentially as biblical illiterates, millions of adults will be vulnerable to the seductive religious arguments it will propose,” he writes.

The movie could do to Christian history what revisionist and conspiracy theory filmmaker Oliver Stone has done to U.S. history — but the stakes are much higher.

“*The Da Vinci Code* is a gross distortion of the historical record,” Strobel says. “It cements opposition to and suspicions of the faith. It fundamentally is an evil message.”

Munsey believes the movie is part of an anti-Christian literature and entertainment movement sweeping the world.

“All other religions will use this as ammunition to attack Christianity and to promote the belief that Jesus was only a man,” Munsey says.

“The person who doesn’t know Jesus and doesn’t know the Bible will shrug his shoulders and say, ‘I thought that about the church anyway.’ It will further distance them from the notion of becoming a Christian.” **tpe**

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E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.



Star Tom Hanks (left) and director Ron Howard say the movie will closely resemble the contents of the book.

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Lee Strobel

How to use The Da Vinci Code to share the good news with others

By George P. Wood

The Da Vinci Code is not the best mystery I’ve ever read. And its historical information is inaccurate. But it gives me the opportunity to talk about Jesus with unchurched friends.

How can we use *The Da Vinci Code* to share the good news with others? In Acts 17:16-34, Paul talks about Jesus with people in Athens. Like many *Da Vinci Code* readers, the Athenians are “spiritual” but not Christian. Paul’s example suggests seven relevant evangelistic principles.

First, be reasonable. Paul is “greatly distressed” by the idols in Athens (verse 16, NIV). Instead of berating the Athenians for idolatry, however, he “reasoned” with them about it (verse 17). Similarly, some ideas in *The Da Vinci Code* are offensive to Christians. But those ideas are great conversation starters. So, use them as reasons to talk about Jesus.

Second, keep the focus on Jesus. Luke describes Paul’s message as “the good news about Jesus and the resurrection” (verse 18). *The Da Vinci Code* talks about many subjects, including, art, architecture and ancient history. You don’t need to be an expert about all of them to share your faith with others. You only need to know the historical facts about Jesus, as well as what He’s done in your own life.

Third, honor spiritual curiosity. Paul doesn’t denounce the idolatry he sees in Athens. Instead of insulting the Athenians’ religion, he honors the spiritual curiosity that motivates it. “I see that in every way

you are very religious” (verse 22). We ought to show the same respect to unchurched friends who read *The Da Vinci Code*. It has excited their interest in spiritual matters. We can build on that curiosity, but only if we honor it first.

Fourth, provide good information. As Paul walks around Athens, he finds an idol dedicated “TO AN UNKNOWN GOD” (verse 23). Instead of making fun of the

Uninformed critics aren’t credible evangelists.

Athenians for their ignorance, he shares the truth about God with them. “Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you” (verse 23). *The Da Vinci Code* is filled with errors about Jesus, the Bible and church history. Some are big errors, others are small. Take time to provide people with the facts.

Fifth, know something about the book. In his speech at the Areopagus, Paul quotes the ideas of two Greek “poets” (verse 28).

By doing so, he demonstrates to the Athenians that he is an informed and intelligent debate partner. If you want your unchurched friends to listen to your good news about Jesus, you need to listen to their ideas too. So, research *The Da Vinci Code*. There are plenty of detailed analyses of the book in *Time*, *Newsweek* and other news outlets. Numbers of Christian magazines have also critiqued the book in detail. Remember, uninformed critics aren’t credible evangelists.

Sixth, commit to ongoing conversation. Some of the Athenians ignore Paul, but others say, “We want to hear you again on this subject” (verse 32). People need time to make up their minds. Every time you give them good answers about *The Da Vinci Code*, they will come up with new and better questions. So, be patient, and keep the lines of communication open.

Finally, build relationships. Verse 34 mentions “Dionysius,” “Damaris,” and “a number of others.” These Athenians believe in Jesus because Paul informs and befriends them. He knows them by name. Sharing your faith is equal parts information and relationship. People need to hear the truth, but they also need to be loved. So, tell your unchurched friends about the love of Jesus, but show it to them as well. **tpe**

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