

# SERIOUS TIMES

MAKING YOUR LIFE MATTER IN AN URGENT DAY

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## To See or Not To See...

While all things “Da Vinci” swirl through the cultural landscape, Christians find themselves united in opposition, but divided in strategy.

To see or not to see, that is the question.

Set for release on May 19<sup>th</sup>, the Oscar-winning duo of director Ron Howard and actor Tom Hanks bring Dan Browne’s novel to the big screen. As president of a seminary, and author of a little “giveaway” booklet from InterVarsity Press titled *The Da Vinci Question*, it’s been all I can do to keep up with requests for interviews from the media over the last few weeks. The first time I was asked about whether or not I thought Christians should see the film, I was somewhat surprised. It had never entered my mind *not* to see the film, but I had never paused to wonder whether I should save an aisle seat for others. My focus, since the release of the novel and its subsequent climb up the bestseller lists, has been to purposefully engage its content in order to speak to the millions of others who have engaged its content. Seeing the film seems necessary for that continued engagement.

But then came the interviews, and it didn’t take many call-in radio shows to discover that people had *very* strong feelings on the matter. I wasn’t alone in finding that emotions are running high. *Christianity Today* ran an online essay by Barbara Nicolosi titled “Let’s ‘Othercott’ *Da Vinci*” (adapted from Nicolosi’s online blog, *Church of the Masses*), which suggested not seeing the movie, buying tickets to another film that weekend, and that joining the “cultural dialogue” would be akin to debating with the Devil himself. She also expressed fear that the movie might lead some Christians astray. *CT* was then flooded with email responses, which led them to write, “Apparently we’ve touched a nerve.”

The reason there has been a strong reaction to *The Da Vinci Code* is because there has seldom been such a spurious and outrageous set of assertions against historic Christianity that has achieved such broad exposure. *The Da Vinci Code* puts forward a blend of fiction and historical assertion that suggests that the entire foundation upon which Christianity is established is false. As such, it deserves to be evaluated vigorously and publicly, and Christians are rightfully doing so.

But the passionate divide as to whether to read the book, or see the film, takes us back to the categories of cultural engagement first espoused by H. Richard Niebuhr in his classic work, *Christ and Culture*. For example, do we take the Christ *against* culture position, and react in anger and

hostility? Historically, this has often meant retreat rather than engagement. At the opposite end of the spectrum would be the Christ *of* culture stance, and buy into the values and ethos of the day and recast our faith accordingly.

A third alternative is seeing Christ as the *transformer* of culture. This means neither retreat nor absorption; instead calling for purposeful engagement. Further, it calls for what my friend Andy Crouch has been calling the “making” of culture. In this case, rather than simply bemoaning works such as Browne’s, perhaps we should write a few influential books ourselves. Or take on the education of the church and its leaders more pointedly, so that the ancient ideas rooted in Gnosticism and pagan goddess worship do not have room to take root.

We are called to be salt and light, and that means cultural engagement. Period. We can have robust dialogue as to how, but the question of whether we *should* is without debate for those who claim to be biblical Christians. In Christ’s day, salt was used as a preservative to ensure that meat didn’t go bad. You can’t fault meat for going bad; it’s what meat does. The question is, “Where is the salt?” We are charged to prevent moral decay in our culture. Going to see a movie may not be the answer to reaching people; but if a movie is the reason people are questioning Christ, or raising questions about Christ, then it may very *well* be the key to reaching them.

So should Christians see the film? I believe that many should, if their mind and soul is prepared, else it will be difficult to speak to the questions it will raise (and film always raises new questions beyond its source material, if only emotive ones). There will be water cooler conversations following May 19<sup>th</sup>, and Christians should be present and accounted for. It has been said that we do not need to defend our God, which is true in the sense it is often spoken, but we do need to engage our world.

And this is why I will have a ticket in hand. Perhaps not on May 19<sup>th</sup> (I am somewhat convinced by the argument that giving the film a big opening weekend might encourage the making of “The Gospel of Judas” or some other *Da Vinci* knock-off), but I will, eventually, see it. This isn’t akin to whether I should fill my mind with sordid images such as might be found in *Brokeback Mountain* (which I chose not to see), or engaging in sin in order to speak credibly against it, but instead engaging the ideas that I know will be presented to hearts and minds about the gospel itself. And along with other Christians, I am called to “Always be prepared to give an answer” (1 Peter 3:15).

But that will first mean knowing the question.

James Emery White

## Sources

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