

## Confronting the 'Code'

Not all religious conservatives are casting stones at the film version of the best-selling book.

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As a conservative evangelical leader, Josh McDowell is one of the last people you'd expect to urge young Christians to see *The Da Vinci Code*, the upcoming movie based on the phenomenally best-selling novel. After all, the book argues that Jesus sired a line of royalty before he died on the cross, because Mary Magdalene was pregnant with his child -- and that all of it was covered up by religious leaders through the centuries.

But McDowell, author of *The Da Vinci Code -- A Quest for Truth*, not only urges a trip to the theater, but also advises everybody to read the novel.

Then, he says, read his book.

"I don't attack [*The Da Vinci Code* author] Dan Brown. I don't attack the book," says McDowell, who is on the staff of Orlando-based Campus Crusade for Christ. "Let's see where fact leaves off and imagination begins. It's a marvelous opportunity to be positive. The main purpose of my book is to reinforce their belief and placate their skepticism. If you look carefully, truth will always stand."

McDowell and Campus Crusade, a worldwide ministry with more than 20,000 staff members and volunteers, seem to have accepted this truth: The movie, starring Tom Hanks and set to open May 19, almost certainly will be a blockbuster. So instead of fighting the wave of popular culture or urging a boycott, Campus Crusade is pushing McDowell's book, which is aimed at young moviegoers and tries to spin their interest in an evangelical direction.

McDowell says he wrote the book after distraught parents told him their children had read the novel and, as a result, walked away from their faith.

The evangelist's rejoinder is a short paperback written in the form of a series of dialogues between a college graduate student and several of his friends. They meet for coffee on a weekly basis to discuss the book after seeing the movie together. The tone is neutral regarding Brown and his motives, and complimentary to his storytelling, but the grad student systematically refutes the way biblical and church history are portrayed in the story.

"It's about engaging with people on their spiritual journey," says Mark Gauthier, Crusade's national director for U.S. campus ministry. "A picture such as *The Da Vinci Code* and the book raises questions about spirituality. This obviously presents a great

opportunity to engage with people as they explore the very spiritual issues that [surface] in the book and movie.

“We see our role in this is not to encourage or discourage people from seeing the movie,” Gauthier says. “Our goal is not to promote or to dissuade people from going. This is the world we live in. This is what people are thinking about. There’s a real desire of people to grapple with serious spiritual issues, not to point fingers.”

Quest for Truth’s publisher, Green Key Books, is considering a first printing of 100,000 copies. Crusade is also planning to print 500,000 copies of a mini-magazine version of the McDowell book, complete with stills from the movie. Like other evangelical groups, Crusade is preparing Web-based study guides to the film.

#### Marketing efforts

Meanwhile, the Hollywood media machine is teaming with a New York publishing powerhouse to create a perfect storm of synergy for a best-selling book turned blockbuster movie.

In March, Random House will release 5 million paperback copies of *The Da Vinci Code*, which has been on best-seller lists for three years, along with several illustrated versions of the screenplay and the complete shooting script.

This kind of coordinated effort is standard drill for tie-ins and marketing hype. What is not by the numbers is a quiet campaign by Sony, the studio producing the film, to court the one group most likely to be offended by the book’s central theme: evangelical Protestants such as McDowell.

Through Grace Hill Media, a Hollywood firm headed by Jonathan Bock that markets studio films to Christian audiences, those who oppose the book’s thesis are being courted, consulted, cajoled and encouraged to voice their criticism in ways that could blunt their opposition. Bock has had extensive meetings and conversations with Campus Crusade officials, including Gauthier, and faculty members of Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, Calif.

“I don’t comment on projects I’m working on,” says Bock, who has promoted *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Holes* and *Walk the Line*.

William Romanowski, author of *Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Popular Culture*, says he is not surprised that Sony hired someone such as Bock to market the movie to the Christian community.

“Bock’s efforts here are that he is trying to advance a kind of dialogue between the church and Hollywood generally and more specifically a dialogue about this film,” says Romanowski, professor of communication arts at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Mich. “They’re moving away from the idea of film as evangelical or educational, toward film as

a means of cultural discourse.”

‘An important shift’

Some evangelicals say they have rejected tentative approaches from Bock’s firm.

“Grace Hill would know we’re not going to get behind this film,” says Bob Waliszewski, of powerful radio ministry Focus on the Family. “Unless it takes moviegoers in a different theological direction than the book. Which I’d doubt is going to happen.”

But others have been more amenable to an accommodation with *The Da Vinci Code*.

“The Campus Crusade book simply shows that, even among more conservative evangelicals, the church’s response to controversial movies is changing,” says Robert K. Johnston, of Fuller Seminary. “Belligerence seldom works. It is more for the speaker than for the listener.”

This is in sharp contrast to Crusade’s reaction to Martin Scorsese’s controversial film *The Last Temptation of Christ*. In 1988, the organization was part of a group that attempted to buy all prints of the movie -- and destroy them.

“It is an important shift that some who have been identified with the conservative side of evangelicalism are now adopting this strategy,” says Johnston, author of *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue*.

Johnston says that, as a result of conversations with Bock, he and another faculty member, Richard Mouw, have agreed to be part of a group of evangelicals and mainline Christians that will be writing articles related to the movie. They also will serve on an advisory panel that the media can contact when the film opens.

The marriage of convenience -- if that is what it is -- between evangelicals and the film’s producers “doesn’t seem so startling to me,” says Teresa Berger, professor of ecumenical theology at Duke University Divinity School. “That’s how consumer capitalism functions in relationship to religious traditions.”

For his part, McDowell can’t wait for May 19.

“I look at the book and the movie as a platform for evangelism,” he says. “A little controversy can be a marvelous tool.”