

ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

“In the Nick of Time”

Occasional Essays
and Other Stuff
for Christian
Students

Presented by the
President of

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American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs *Christian* leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life's urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting today's Christian students to become tomorrow's Christian leaders.

—Kevin T. Bauder

“...Be instant in season,
out of season;
reprove, rebuke, exhort
with all longsuffering
and doctrine.”

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April 7, 2006
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The Da Vinci Code

Part Five

“The Apostle Mary”

Kevin T. Bauder

The early Christian community had to invent an entirely new vocabulary. In order to develop new terminology, the followers of Jesus took old words and invested them with new, technical meanings. The word for *shepherd* became the title of a church office (*pastor*), as did the word for *old man* (*elder*) and a word for *servant* (*deacon*). The word for the evening meal became the name of a Christian ritual (the *supper*). Christians actually used the general term for an assembly to designate the church itself.

Christians adapted these words into technical terms, but they also continued to use them in their older, more general sense. Technical and non-technical uses are intermingled in Christian literature. Sometimes this intermingling can create confusion: occasionally a usage is not clear.

One of the words that the early Christians invested with new meaning was the word *apostle*. Originally this word simply referred to a person who was sent as a messenger or envoy. The first Christians used it to denote the leaders whom Jesus had appointed to govern the community of His followers. Alongside this formal, official usage, however, they also kept using

the word in its general, non-technical sense. For example, Acts 14:14 calls Barnabas an apostle, probably because he had been sent as a messenger from the church at Antioch. In a similar vein, Paul refers to Epaphroditus as an apostle of the church at Philippi—Epaphroditus had been sent from Philippi to deliver a message and gift to Paul in prison (Phil. 2:25).

This “double usage” of terms within early Christianity is directly relevant to one of Dan Brown’s assertions in *The Da Vinci Code*. Brown alleges that early Christianity included female apostles, particularly Mary Magdalene. He thinks that this represents a more dignified understanding of the role of women that was later lost when Constantine converted Christianity into a patriarchal religion.

Brown bases his theory about female apostles upon two ancient documents. One is a commentary by Hippolytus, who pastored a faction of the Christian church in Rome during the late Second and early Third Centuries. The second document is *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, a Gnostic document written (at the earliest) during the Second Century.

Hippolytus’ remarks occur in his commentary on the Old Testament document, the “Song of Songs” or “Song of Solomon,” 24-26. In context, Hippolytus is discussing the role of women as witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus. To understand Hippolytus’ reference, it is necessary to review the order of events after the resurrection.

On Easter morning, certain women (including Mary Magdalene) went to the tomb of Jesus and were met by the angel (Matt. 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-8). The angel announced to the women that Jesus had arisen. Then he instructed the women to tell Jesus’ disciples that Jesus was going into Galilee and would meet them there. The women, however, were so afraid that they kept this angelic announcement secret. Subsequently, a second episode occurred (Mark 16:9-11; John 20:11-18). Jesus appeared personally to Mary Magdalene outside the empty tomb. Following that episode, Mary went and announced to the disciples that she had seen the risen Lord Jesus. Luke abbreviates his account of both of these instances (Luke 24:1-11), but adds the useful information that at least four women were involved as witnesses of these events.

When Mary Magdalene and the other women announced that they had seen Jesus, the disciples refused to believe them. Later on, Jesus appeared (unrecognized, at first) to two disciples on the road to Emmaus. These disciples explicitly mentioned the testimony of the women, which they still did not believe (Luke 24:22-23). Jesus rebuked these men for their unbelief and then revealed who He was.

In his commentary, Hippolytus refers to these women, including Mary Magdalene, as “female apostles,” stating that “Christ Himself came to them so that the women would be apostles of Christ.” Hippolytus also has Jesus rebuking the male apostles, stating that He Himself had appeared to the women because “I wanted to send them to you as apostles.”

Almost certainly Hippolytus is using the word “apostle” in its usual, non-technical sense of “messenger.” The resurrection accounts clarify why he could. The women were commissioned by the angel, and later by Jesus Himself, to announce the resurrection to the disciples. That is exactly what an apostle (in the general sense) does. For Hippolytus to call these women “apostles,” however, does not place them in the formal office of apostle, any more than Barnabas or Epaphroditus were official apostles.

The second document to which Dan Brown appeals is *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*. The first part of this work has been lost, but the surviving text opens with Jesus instructing His

disciples and then departing. After His departure the disciples are overcome with grief at the task Jesus has assigned to them, but Mary Magdalene stands and encourages them. Peter appeals to Mary, remarking that Jesus loved her more than the rest of women. He asks her to reiterate whatever words of Jesus she remembers. Mary responds by claiming that she has received a special revelation through a vision of Jesus, and she relates what Jesus said to her. When she finishes, Andrew objects that he does not believe Mary because what she says is too strange. An incredulous Peter also protests that Jesus would not have revealed so much privately to a woman that He did not reveal openly to the male disciples. Mary bursts into tears and asks whether Peter really thinks that she is deluded or lying, whereupon Levi rebukes Peter for being too hot-tempered and treating Mary as if she were an enemy. He argues that if Jesus made Mary worthy, then they must not reject her. He concedes that Jesus loved Mary more than He loved the male disciples.

How is Mary Magdalene perceived by the author of *The Gospel of Mary*? First, she is seen as one toward whom Jesus held great affection. Second, she is one to whom Jesus gave a remarkable, special revelation. Incidentally, neither of these points is necessarily objectionable on the face of it. For all we know, Jesus may have held Mary Magdalene in greater affection than any other women or even than His male disciples. The New Testament simply does not address this issue. The New Testament does, however, present women as the recipients of special revelation (i.e., as prophets). Corinth had women who prophesied (1 Cor. 11:5), and Philip the Evangelist had four daughters who prophesied (Acts 21:8-9). No reason exists to think that Mary Magdalene could not have received special revelation from Jesus, though several reasons can be given for denying that she received the revelation that is narrated in *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*.

Even so, nothing in the text of this Gnostic gospel indicates that Mary was an apostle. Beloved by Jesus, yes. A recipient of revelation, yes. None of that, however, equals apostleship.

What is more, *The Gospel of Mary* displays the typical Gnostic contempt of women. Peter objects that Mary's femaleness is what makes her an unlikely recipient of special revelation (which clearly contradicts the teaching of the New Testament). Levi's response is not that females are worthy recipients, but that Jesus has *made* Mary worthy *in spite of* the fact that she is a female. In other words, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala* does not have an elevated view of women, but a rather demeaning view. This is typical of Gnostic thought.

Dan Brown would like us to believe that early Christianity recognized at least one female apostle: Mary Magdalene. He would also like us to believe that the presence of one or more female apostles is proof that early Christians held a higher view of women than the later, patriarchal revision of Christianity by Constantine. For proof, Brown relies upon a discussion in Hippolytus and a conversation in *The Gospel of Mary*. As we have seen, however, neither of these documents supports the idea that Mary or any other woman ever held apostolic office in early Christianity. In short, *The Da Vinci Code* does not present a bit of convincing evidence for the apostleship of Mary Magdalene. ✕

This essay is by [Kevin T. Bauder](#), president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

Amoretti LXVIII: Most Glorious Lord of Life

Edmund Spenser (1552-1599)

Most glorious Lord of life, that on this day,
Didst make thy triumph over death and sin:
And having harrow'd hell, didst bring away
Captivity thence captive, us to win:

This joyous day, dear Lord, with joy begin,
And grant that we for whom thou diddest die,
Being with thy dear blood clean wash'd from sin,
May live for ever in felicity.

And that thy love we weighing worthily,
May likewise love thee for the same again:
And for thy sake, that all like dear didst buy,
With love may one another entertain.

So let us love, dear love, like as we ought,
Love is the lesson which the Lord us taught. ✠

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