



**Telling the Gospel Through Fiction:
The Lost Epistle of Jesus
An Interview with Evan Drake Howard**



Overview

Evan Drake Howard brings the gospel to life through fiction in his latest work, *The Lost Epistle of Jesus*. Biblical characters—Nicodemus, Mary Magdalene, Jesus, and others—interact with a fictional cast in an epic love story set in first century Jerusalem. The drama evolves from the dilemmas created by passion, jealousy, betrayal, and family conflict. Heartbreak becomes healing when the fictional characters discover new spiritual, psychological, and theological insights in the teachings and compassion of Jesus. Encouraging these discoveries is at the heart of Evan's ministry as a pastor and writer. He offers a vision of "holistic Christianity," which presents the gospel as an alternative to our materialistic and violent culture, and which integrates personal and public faith. Based on biblical interpretations that illuminate the path to both individual healing and social justice, Holistic Christianity embodies the hope of all things made new. What emerges is a broadening understanding of the nature of God, a celebration of Jesus as mystical revolutionary, and a foundation from which to address today's pressing interfaith issues. The CRG spoke with Evan in October 2007.

About Evan Drake Howard

The Reverend Dr. Evan Drake Howard, author of *The Lost Epistle of Jesus*, has a passion for church renewal. His ministry as an American Baptist pastor has taken him into traditional "Old First Church" congregations in multicultural urban settings. His congregations have included students from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Harvard University, Brown University, and several other colleges. He also worked in campus ministry at the University of Chicago. Since 1988, he has served as pastor of the Community Church of Providence, Rhode Island. A native of the Pacific Northwest, he graduated from the University of Washington, received his M.Div. degree from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, and earned a Th.D. from Boston University.

Evan is the author of several resources based on the Bible and lectionary texts to help people deepen spiritually through the liturgical seasons: *Rekindling the Hope of the Manger: An Advent Study*; and *From Sacrifice to Celebration: A Lenten Journey*. His book *Centered in God* sets forth a contemporary spirituality rooted in the life and faith of Jesus. He also wrote *Suffering Loss, Seeking Healing*, a collection of prayers to help people recover from grief experiences. His first novel, *The Lost Epistle of Jesus*, dramatizes the emphasis in the Gospels on faith that heals both individuals and society.

Interview

CRG: How did you decide to portray the Gospels through fiction?

Evan: My writing fiction is related to congregational transformation and a greater sense of health in ministry within the church. I've done all of the traditional things like leading Bible studies and preaching the best sermons I can. I wanted to develop other kinds of small group ministries. I also wanted to reach out to the broader community and try to expand our stable but small congregation. (Our average worship attendance is under one hundred people.)

The audience for the nonfiction books I've written has mostly been people who already have a connection to Christianity or a church. In the broader culture, I saw how people were being drawn to Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, and the Harry Potter novels. Conservative Christian publishers were also doing well with *The Left Behind* series. At a Borders bookstore I stumbled upon the novel *Joshua* by Father Joseph Girzone, and I wondered why his book was doing so well. Later I talked with Fr. Girzone and heard his story, and that inspired me to give fiction a try. I hope that presenting my faith through storytelling might be an opportunity to engage a wider audience. By taking the Gospels as my starting point, I am challenged to understand how "the greatest story ever told" relates to the stories of our lives today.

CRG: How do you hope your novels will be used in a congregational setting?

Evan: I hope they will inspire a more creative way of doing Bible study. The group will read the novel and then come back together for discussion. My Web site has a six-week study guide, and there are discussion questions included in the book. Using the guide, the novel, and the Bible, the group discussion will include interaction between the fictional story and the actual biblical text.

CRG: How did *The Lost Epistle of Jesus* develop?

Evan: The book developed out of a faith crisis of sorts. I'd invested seven years or so writing a previous novel; it was a big disappointment when it wasn't published. I went on a retreat and tried to pray through what I should do next. In reflecting on my own faith experience, I realized that there are some characters in the Bible who have especially engaged and inspired me.

A minor character in the Gospel of Luke—one of the men crucified with Jesus—became a major character in the book. The "good thief" has spoken to me over the years—ever since I was a boy hearing the story of the Crucifixion. Returning to his story began the "what if" process: What may have been happening in his life before he came to repentance and faith? One thing led to another and the book started to develop.

CRG: Your book includes topics, places, and characters that I've grown up with in the church setting and through the Bible. At first, it was jarring to have them set as "real" characters in a "real" book. There was something about the novel form that really brought them to life.

Evan: That's what I was hoping. A fictional story isn't literally true; it didn't really happen, but a story can be spiritually, psychologically, or theologically true in the larger metaphorical sense. That's what I'm aiming for. Writing fiction is a way of getting people to think more deeply about their faith.

CRG: Can you provide an example of how that works in the book?

Evan: Jesus didn't really write an epistle, or at least we don't have a manuscript of anything he might have written. The only place where we see him write is in the dust in the story of the woman taken in adultery. But as my novel began to develop, I wondered what Jesus might have written to Nicodemus after his late-night conversation with him. Even though Nicodemus is a religious leader, a Pharisee, and a member of the Sanhedrin, Jesus tells him that he must be born anew. In John 3, many deep theological themes follow: the role of the Spirit, the meaning of Truth, and the natures of God and Jesus.

What if Jesus wanted to explain more about these topics, and about what it means to be "born again" and wrote Nicodemus a letter? Holistic faith is about an ongoing, dynamic spiritual deepening and many conversions, not just one. That's where the idea of the lost epistle came in. As I thought about my Christian journey, I realized how many deaths and rebirths I have needed to make sense of my life and the world. My characters have these, too. I wonder if Nicodemus was a religious leader who, like clergy today, had his own share of personal

struggles. Perhaps he had certain faith crises or issues in his marriage or family. In the epistle, Jesus addresses these, and I hope that his insights, based on the wisdom found in the Bible, are helpful to readers today.

CRG: Without giving too much away, what ideas does Jesus include in the letter?

Evan: One theme is the integration of the masculine and feminine in the image of God. I grew up, as many people did, seeing God as primarily male. I eventually got to a point in my life where the male image wasn't working for me. My own need to go deeper took me to spiritual directors and a very good pastoral counselor who helped me see the limitations of imaging God as only masculine. I started thinking more about Jesus as a person, and the thing that really came through is how liberated and integrated he was in both his actions and teachings.

I wondered where that came from. Perhaps from his understanding of God and the Bible of his time, the Torah. It may also have been from his relationships with the women in his life—which led me to think of Mary Magdalene.

We have these two extremes. In 591 CE, Pope Gregory the Great preached a sermon that presented Mary Magdalene as a repentant prostitute. He conflated the three Marys in the Gospel story into one person. That became Church doctrine from the sixth century until 1969, when the Roman Catholic Church finally said there wasn't a scriptural basis for Pope Gregory's views. The other extreme is in Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*—the idea that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married, and that she was pregnant with Jesus' child when he was crucified.

I wondered if there's some middle ground, where Jesus, being as human as any of us, struggled with his romantic feelings for Mary Magdalene. Perhaps she had a major role in his personal development, his inner development, and his faith development. Then, perhaps, for some very practical reasons related to his ministry and where he saw things going, he decided not to marry her.

Mary Magdalene is only mentioned twelve times in the New Testament. Eleven of those are in the crucifixion and resurrection scenes. I think there's evidence that she must have been very close to Jesus, to go through all of this and stay with him to the end. She was also the one to whom he revealed himself after the Resurrection. Even if Jesus and Mary Magdalene weren't married, they must have been very close.

All of that factored into Jesus being someone who had the stereotypically masculine qualities of standing up to the Pharisees and driving the moneychangers out of the Temple. He also had stereotypically feminine qualities. He nurtured children and used them as an example of the Kingdom of God. He blessed the peacemakers, the merciful and the meek. He included women in his band of followers at a time when that was a radical thing to do. He was sensitive to women who had poor reputations, like the woman at the well and the women taken in adultery. Where does all of this come from? This thinking had a significant influence on the development of the epistle.

CRG: How have congregations and individuals responded to the integration of the male and female as presented in the *Lost Epistle*?

Evan: People come out in all different places, which becomes an opportunity for dialogue. Some who are more comfortable with a very conservative, traditional faith are threatened by it. Others find it very exciting and liberating. They find a lot of hope for reconciliation between men and women and a more sensitive way of dealing with difficult issues related to sexuality. I've gotten some feedback from several men who have found it very helpful to their own concept of God and their own self-image.

I don't feel that a gender-inclusive image of God is radical, but rather true to the Judeo-Christian faith tradition. It's one of those treasures buried in the field that can be life-changing once you find it.

CRG: What other themes do you explore in *The Lost Epistle*?

Evan: The creation story is essential for the epistle, too. The creation text says very clearly that God created humanity in God's image, male and female. So, to me, that is a primary text for understanding the image of God.

We also live in a highly sexualized culture. Hopefully some of the fictionalized scenarios in the book will challenge people to think about a healthier way to conceive of relationships between men and women. This holistic thinking might even help us with homosexuality.

Another major theme is the nonviolence of Jesus. From everything that we know about him, he preached nonviolence and remained nonviolent until the end. He did this in a context where there was great pressure on him to support the message of the Zealots, which was based on violence and a military solution to Roman oppression. The interplay between politics, religion, and business is a major part of both the epistle and the whole story—which eventually led to Jesus' crucifixion.

Another major theme is God's perseverance with us through heartbreak and the miracle of grace to provide healing. Some of the characters also struggle with the effects of betrayal and the challenge that embracing forgiveness presents.

CRG: You offer something you call "Holistic Christianity." Can you tell us more about that?

Evan: Holistic Christianity is about healing. The Gospels present Jesus as the Great Physician. Even the most liberal New Testament scholars affirm that he must have been a tremendous healer. There are many examples of him healing not only the physical person but also the psychological, emotional and spiritual person. Integrating the masculine and feminine in human beings and in God is part of this healing movement. Another part is looking at the ministry of Jesus and what was essential for him—preaching the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God has both a social, outer expression, and an inner, personal expression.

I agree with Jim Wallis of Sojourners that the Christian faith is always personal but never private. Jesus brings together our deepest personal experience of God and our experience of the world. These experiences are different pieces of the same "whole" cloth. They're never separated. When they are separated, you have something other than the teaching and preaching of Jesus.

Holistic Christianity also has implications for interfaith relationships. It affirms the sacredness of human personality, since people of all nations and faiths are created in the image of God. Love requires us to search for common ground with these people, even if their beliefs differ from ours. This is the way to become peacemakers and create a better world. Unless we engage in theological reflection and are self-critical about our traditions, how can we ever break the cycle of endless war?

CRG: You want your work to reach those outside the church. What do you have to say about those who have delved into spirituality but not necessarily Christianity?

Evan: Even though they may have had a bad experience with the church or have misconceptions, maybe they will read my book and give Christianity another chance. Christopher Hitchens, in his bestseller, *God is Not Great*, is doing a disservice to any thinking person by lumping together all religions and all concepts of God in his atheistic critique. The answer to bad religion is not no religion. That would be impossible, since human beings are inherently religious. The answer to bad religion is better religion. I hope that readers will see in my book an interpretation of Christianity that is healing and transforming for both our faith tradition and our personal lives.

CRG: It's interesting when people are adamant about saying, "I don't believe in God."

One question that comes to mind is, "Well, what God do you not believe in?"

Evan: That's true. I don't know what the numbers are, but from browsing in bookstores I can see that there must be a lot of people interested in the New Age/Self-help movements, because there are lots of those books! I'm fascinated by what draws people to these movements. I'm also interested in sharing my faith with all types of people, the New Age types included. When I present my faith holistically, maybe some of these folks will give Christianity another chance—those who have read books like *The Celestine Prophecy*, for example, or *The Alchemist*.

CRG: What other ideas do you have to help congregations engage their faith with the culture?

Evan: I would love to see more people in churches reading books and watching movies together. These are opportunities for spiritual growth and theological reflection, and also ways to reach out to people who are not members of the congregation. Some churches allow artists in the congregation or from the community to display their paintings. Others bring in guest speakers to address topics related to the arts and Christianity or faith and politics. Sometimes there are professionals in various fields in the congregation and these people are willing to provide forums to which the community is invited. I serve a multicultural congregation, and we're planning an international dinner as a way to reach out, based on our own uniqueness. No church can be all things to all people, but each church has its own unique character and identity. When we capitalize on our uniqueness in our outreach efforts, we always have something special to share.

CRG: Are there specific movies you recommend?

Evan: The movie *Chocolat* is one of my favorites. I've used it as a sermon illustration on Pentecost Sunday, because it begins with the wind blowing as a woman and her daughter come as strangers to a new town. Later there's a scene where the mayor of this rigid town breaks into the heroine's chocolate shop, wanting to destroy it because she is breaking Lenten rules by serving sweets. Then he starts tasting the chocolate and gives up his vendetta against her. His heart softens, and he becomes a changed man. It's a powerful example of what grace is like. When we get a taste of grace, it breaks through the mess we make of our lives and transforms us.

Another favorite of mine is *Bruce Almighty*. The main character has the opportunity to play God, and when he does, he gives us insights into dilemmas such as why some prayers are answered and others seemingly aren't. In one scene, Bruce tries to use his newfound power to force his estranged girlfriend to love him, but it doesn't work. It's a good illustration of how even God can't make us love him. Authentic love can only happen as a free choice.

Movies such as *Spanglish* and *The River Wild* show us marriages that are in deep trouble. As the drama develops, the couples must confront their problems through a series of crises. This means facing their personal shortcomings and finding ways to grow beyond them. There are also movies that deal with social issues, such as *Thelma and Louise*, *Erin Brockovich*, and numerous others. *The Lives of Others* takes us into East Germany under Communism and shows us the sacrifices that some people made to help the country move toward freedom.

An older movie, *The Mission*, portrays a man's quest for redemption after he commits a terrible crime. *Amadeus* shows us how envying another person's gifts and then bargaining with God in the hope of equaling them can lead to insanity.

With so many movies coming out each year, the list of possibilities is endless. Pastors can draw on movies in counseling, preaching and teaching, and in their role as spiritual guide, to help people learn and grow. Churches can also purchase a license that allows them to show films legally. Then they can invite the public. There are also clips of various movies that are available to pastors for use as sermon illustrations.

CRG: Are there other creative things that you've done that have been successful?

Evan: When *The Da Vinci Code* was on the bestseller list, I led a four-week study that explored its claims and compared them with the biblical evidence. I advertised the group in the newspaper and several first-time visitors participated. I also spent some time in our adult forum discussing Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. Those sessions were only for the people of my congregation, but the attendance at the forum more than doubled. I have also led a Bible study on the Book of Revelation in dialogue with *The Left Behind* series. That was a challenge and proved to be a test of perseverance for the small but loyal group that attended. Perhaps my favorite group to lead is called "Spiritual Growth through Fiction and Film." These groups are very stimulating. We discuss the classical components of a good story, and the participants share their responses to their favorite novels and movies.

Resources

[Evan Drake Howard Web Site](http://www.evandrakehoward.com/)

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This Web site offers information about Evan and his publications. Downloadable excerpts from *The Lost Epistle of Jesus*—the [Prologue](#) and [Chapter One](#)—and a [Study Guide](#) are available.

[The Lost Epistle of Jesus](#)

Evan Drake Howard, Author. Longwood, FL: Crown Oak Press, 2007.

The novel's creative narrative brings to life the characters, emotions, and internal dialogue of the Gospel story. Nicodemus, Mary Magdalene, Jesus, and others are presented not as traditional biblical characters but rather as very real, very human people struggling with contemporary issues such as love, loyalty, jealousy, spiritual awakening, and politics. This book reads like a contemporary novel—which can be jarring at first—and would be an excellent resource for individuals or study groups. Discussion questions are included in the book and a [free study guide](#) is available online.

Available from the publisher, 866-909-2665, or through [Amazon](#) or [Barnes & Noble](#).

[Spiritual Growth Through Fiction and Scripture: A Study Guide for use with the novel The Lost Epistle of Jesus](#)

Evan Drake Howard, Author. Longwood, FL: Crown Oak Press, 2007.

This guide offers six studies designed to help make connections between Scripture and the novel *The Lost Epistle of Jesus*. Each study includes an introductory overview with historical context when appropriate, suggestions for using fiction as a vehicle for spiritual imagination, a spiritual meditation exercise, and scriptural study with discussion questions. Topics include: The Spirituality of Place; The Challenge of the Christ Story; An Invitation to Holistic Christianity; Jesus, Mary Magdalene and Us, Lessons from the Tragedy of Judas Iscariot; and Following the Way of Peace.

[From Sacrifice to Celebration: A Lenten Journey](#)

Evan Drake Howard, Author. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1993.

Drawing from contemporary culture and individual Gospel characters, this book guides readers and study groups through the liturgical season of Lent to the celebration of Easter and into a deeper relationship with God. The book is based on the premise that contemporary culture—with its nonstop entertainment and high-tech gadgetry—leaves people bored and "haunted by the wilderness within." This hunger for more is the basis of a renewed relationship with God. Each chapter focuses on a Gospel character's journey from boredom to bonding. Full of hope and possibility, this approach to Lent breaks through onerous disciplines to "an adventure beyond the ordinary."

Available from the [publisher](#) or through [Amazon](#).

This interview is part of the Wise Voices project, which gathers thoughts and essays from people who know congregations. These are leaders with know-how—through first-hand knowledge, academic study, or practical experience. If you are or know of a Wise Voice we should include, please contact us at info@crg.org.