

Question and Answer: In the cross hairs

Harry Potter

Richard Gurgel

What is the WELS position on the Harry Potter series? Some say they are wrong and won't allow their kids to read them, while others let their kids read them.

Your question yields no simple answer. Some are ready to hold a book burning and want our synod to ban books. They need one answer. Others see no harm from children (or adults) becoming absorbed in these books. They need quite a different answer. Allow me to offer answers for both extremes.

Banning isn't necessary

First, let me address those who lean toward condemning any reading of such books except to refute them. Most literature contains large quantities of things with which we disagree. Other than the Bible, we need to exercise discretion whenever we read. Developing spiritual discretion is an essential skill in an unbelieving world: "Test everything. Hold on to the good" (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

Much of what we disagree with in Harry Potter is quite obvious compared to far more subtle influences. When Satan wishes to do his worst, he doesn't wear wizard's robes but "masquerades as an angel of light" (2 Corinthians 11:14). Much of what comes out of Christian publishers, containing subtle mixtures of truth and error, is far more dangerous than Harry Potter because the Christian may read it with his guard down.

Couldn't a Christian parent read a Harry Potter book with a child and sort through what is right and wrong? Might that help children toward a lifetime of better discernment of what comes at them from all media?

What's more, we would not say that every flight of a child's imagination is evil. A child (or adult) can find enjoyment in make-believe. In one of the talks I had with my 11-year-old about these books, I reminded him that there is no such thing as good and bad magic, but all such claiming of powers apart from God is stealing God's glory. My son reminded me that he understood Harry to be literature, not life, by saying, "I know, Dad, but he's fake!"

One final warning: to set up as many rules as possible is not the heart of our faith. We would not necessarily be stronger Christians if we could boast that nothing tainted by the world has ever entered our homes or minds. Listen to what Paul said to those who were becoming a little too enamored by rules and regulations: "Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: 'Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!?' These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence" (Colossians 2:20-23). In the immediate context, Paul isn't addressing banning books, but a false asceticism that labeled as evil all physical things in God's creation.

However, there is a principle for our discussion. As we work hard to keep evil from getting at us from the outside, the danger is that we forget our real problem is sinful hearts on the inside. My heart needs a daily humbling dose of the reality of my own sinfulness so that I run, not to find better rules, but to the cross of Christ for free forgiveness and for power to live in the world but not of it. Remember: those who caused Jesus the greatest trouble were the most scrupulous moralists of the day. "Taste not! Touch not! Handle not!" was the Pharisees' theme song.

Caution is needed

But now for the sake of those who may be waving high their Harry Potter books in triumph that *Forward in Christ* magazine has given its approval, allow me to sound some real cautions in your direction.

Although fantasy books and movies have existed for years, the culture in which those books and movies appear today is vastly different from our parents' and grandparents' culture. We have moved from an outwardly Christian culture to one that loves anything "spiritual" as long as it isn't biblical. Wisconsin Christians were rudely awakened to the shifting sands of our "spiritual" brave new world when my state hired a Wiccan priestess (the Rev. Jaymi Witch!) as a prison chaplain.

It is particularly among adolescents and young teens that interest seems to be on the rise in things bordering on the occult. In such a spiritual smorgasbord environment, isn't there reason for concern if our children idolize someone whose triumphs are riding his Nimbus 2000 broom and becoming as adept at casting spells as his schoolmates? The danger is one of developing a spiritually unhealthy fascination with things magical and superstitious. The apparent progression of the intensity of the magic in the successive books of the series also bears

watching.

Allowing our children to read what may confuse and disturb them with little or no Christian guidance is spiritual child abuse, even if the vast majority of those children never try to make a feather levitate or run out to buy a how-to book on casting spells.

The most deadly combination is a home without many words from Jesus but with plenty of words about Harry. Christian discernment doesn't flow naturally from sinful hearts. Discernment is a spiritual gift nurtured by frequent contact with the Spirit's inspired words. It's a gift best "tested" under the loving guidance of mature Christians.

Our sinful nature loves to twist Christian freedom into a "cover-up for [doing] evil" (1 Peter 2:16). To soar above other supposed "weak" believers by proudly boasting that potential spiritual traps can't bother us, leaves us sounding ridiculously similar to a fellow named Peter who crash landed amidst the flames of his boasts. Against such proud arrogance Paul wrote: "So, if you think that you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall" (1 Corinthians 10:12)!

Final thoughts

Where does this leave us?

A banned book list substitutes limited rules for exercising sound wisdom and discretion. Nor is the answer to repeat the proud mantra of some in Corinth:

"Everything is permissible for me." To that Paul answered: " 'Everything is permissible for me' —but not everything is beneficial. 'Everything is permissible for me' —but I will not be mastered by anything"

(1 Corinthians 6:12).

Neither a blanket condemnation nor a blanket endorsement is the "Christian" answer. Christians need to wrestle with such questions without imposing their best solution as the only suitable response for every Christian family. We must heed the warnings Scripture speaks both to those who *add* and to those who *subtract* from it!

We don't need our synod to supply us with an Oprah Winfrey reading list nor a banned book registry. We need Christians well-versed in Scripture and growing in Christ's saving love for them—who then share that regularly with their children. We need Christians wrestling in prayer for spiritual wisdom to live in the world but not be of it—who then model that for their children.

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