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An ethics of story: a rejoinder to the Harry Potter debate

The *Harry Potter* series is probably the defining work of story in postmodernity, certainly it is the most popular story. Yet there are many issues with the story and its premise and while these issues may end up being logically debated there is a more important issue that those who follow in the way of Jesus must wrestle with. The debate surrounding the story of Harry Potter is really a discussion of developing a Christian ethic of story. What is ethics? Ethics is the analysis of morality. What is morality? Morality is the dimension of life related to right conduct, including virtuous character, honorable intentions, and right actions. Developing an ethic of story will help us act morally in relationship to story. However, such a journey (especially within the religious and communal context many of you reading this find yourselves) is dangerous and I will address three specific dangers for us along the way. As we set out on this journey of developing a Christian ethic of story, allow me to begin with a story of my own.

I have never been terribly fast or athletic. My older brother John was always much more coordinated and athletically skilled. He has always been bigger than me (and much stronger) and being older it was his job to pick on me when we were young. I did not mind wrestling or getting hit, but I went off the deep end when John sat on me. He would wrestle me down to the ground, sit on my chest, and laughingly taunt my inability to do anything. It was the words of the song come to life:

*You can't mean to me
Mean as you want to be*

*Just do anything that you like
 You can be nasty, intolerable, cruel and unusual
 Twist my nose with your fingers
 Trip me while I carry liquids
 But as you pin me down
 My arms down on the ground
 And your spit drips into my face
 Deep in the back of your mind
 Remember at some point you'll have to fall asleep*

And even though I was younger, weaker, slower, and inferior I devised a plan to attack John with the only thing that could defeat him, a fluffy white Lamb Chops puppet that belonged to our younger sibling. One day, John was walking down the hall and right at the key unsuspecting moment, Lamb Chops was unleashed right at John's face. He screamed like a schoolgirl and jumped in the air with both legs out straight in front of him so he landed on the ground in the seated position. Oh how the mighty have fallen. Alas! Victory!

The rhetorical power struggle, cosmic battle between good and evil, and the role of fear in this story are instructive to us as we approach the development of a Christian ethic of story. First, when we examine literature, art, media, or design, the danger for conservative Christians is to make truth claims that scare people. That's my biggest critique for many of the authors who critique the story of Harry Potter (including Wohlberg and Abanes). They make claims intended to police literature and define who is in and who is out.

This stance comes from one of two positions on resolving conflict. Jordan and Margaret Paul, in their book *Do I Have to Give Up Me to be Loved by You?*, believe that conflict can be only approached in two basic ways: with the "intent to protect" or the "intent to learn." The protective response is rooted in fear, mistrust and the desire to

protect oneself from the “other.” The learning response, on the other hand, is rooted in the desire to understand and grow closer to oneself and the other.¹ Many authors who critique the story of *Harry Potter* do so with an intent to protect, not an intent to learn. As you may have learned through the process of debating this very issue, debating with an intent to protect gets the community of faith next to nowhere. When this debate takes place, one of two things may happen.

Option one (intent to protect): Assuming the two sides are talking about their interpretations and their theology (which comes into play as we discuss story), let’s assume the debate happens at the most detailed place where the sentences and syllables of the text are interpreted and each side tries to persuade each other with their own sources. It’s extremely unlikely that they will actually do so. Each will have time to go blow by blow through their argument and it is extremely unlikely that any position will change.

Option two (intent to learn): the two sides learn from each other. They might still be deadlocked, but it’s a very different way of going about it.

Think of a Ferrari. A Ferrari is meant to be driven, not just looked at and scrutinized. If you take apart a Ferrari, down to the screws and you take one screw out and look at it, that screw was not created just to be a screw, it was created to play a tiny role in supporting the whole thing. We cannot come to story (and THE story of the Gospel) by looking at a dictionary. In fact, may we never say, “the dictionary says” in a theological, moral, or ethical debate (which the debate on *Harry Potter* is). This kind of logic is akin to saying that we appreciate a Ferrari by reading someone else’s report of what they have discovered about one of the Ferrari’s screws. If life, theology, and story make sure that you are doing your own work. If you look critically at the work of Abanes and Wohlberg, it is pretty clear that they have not read the *Harry Potter* series.

¹ Jason Li, “Fostering Constructive Dialogue in the Racial Arena, 2003.” BARRC paper, Bethel College and Seminary, St. Paul.

Taking a con position in any debate without doing your work at the scholarly level is lazy and the community of faith needs you to take your work seriously.

Furthermore these authors argue vehemently, “Don’t read this, it’s rooted in the Satanic and the demonic.” This requires a strong theological response (in addition to the practical response of understanding the basics of story, which Abanes and Wohlberg are flatly uninformed). I think we need to be careful of the simplicity within which we view spiritual beings (angels, demons, and Satan). As you do the spiritual discipline of theology please be aware that the role of spiritual beings in Scripture is more than angels protect people and demons cause evil and possess people. There’s more to that, but more on that later. The Gospel, the story God is telling and the role we are to play, is the declaration that Christ has overcome the spiritual principalities and powers (Col 2:15, Eph 3:11). We do not need to be afraid. Paul encourages Timothy; “For God did not give us a spirit of fear, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.”²

We have now examined one of the dangers involved in the debate over the story of *Harry Potter* and this danger is related to the source material of the debate itself. However in any debate, conclusions must be delineated and therein lies the second danger. The dangerous position is allowing the personal choice of literature to become relative to the person. Here’s my issue with Connie Neal. What’s a Christian to do with Harry Potter? Neal proposes that Christians decide what to do with Harry Potter, but just the idea of coming to a decision is not helpful. Most of us already have come to a decision about what kinds of books to read, media to consume, and even physical behaviors to engage in with our significant others (in other words, we have made ethical

² 1 Timothy 2:7

decisions about behavior). Coming to a decision is not the issue; developing a well-reasoned decision is a step in the right direction, but it is not the end we need. We need to uncover truth. The simple way out is to throw our hands up in the air and say, “Awww shucks, reading Harry Potter is fine for some families but not for mine.” You may not want to offend your mother, but that kind of response to any ethical situation is morally irresponsible (but it might make your mom happy). It is sloppy ethics and I think we can do better as people walking in the way of Jesus.

Do these kinds of choices lend themselves to the development of a normative relativism and a postmodern ethic? Normative relativism implies that contradictory ethical beliefs may both be right. In other words, there is no universal right and wrong but these are relative to the culture, situation, and individual. A Postmodern ethic is an ethic that denies the existence of objective truth (or absolute truth, but objective refers to the way we know the truth and this brings into account all sorts of epistemological issues or issues surrounding the way we know things). If we are responsible students of the Bible and followers of Christ, the conclusion that reading *Harry Potter* or any other story is a family decision needs to be questioned. What is the role of moral absolutes here, if any? In order to help inform us on this particular danger as we deal with literature is to come to a decision about revelation.

Revelation (not the book of the Bible) is concerned with the way God revealed Himself to humanity. There are different categories of revelation, but for our purposes we need to examine Scripture. What is the Bible? The Bible is a communicative speech act. It is God acting upon humanity, not just talking. Let’s not assume that communication is about person A giving parcel B to person C and person C internalizing

it. Communication is not like throwing a ball to someone else. Communicating is acting upon another. It's like throwing the ball to another person, but intentionally hitting them in the face. You are not just transmitting something to them; you are impacting them. As it relates to the Bible, God not only spoke words, He acted upon humanity and when we communicate in story with one another, we are impacting one another and this communication creates new realities that cannot be undone. In the case of a debate, the points and logic articulated is not just words transmitted from the pro group to the con group, it is logic acted upon for the purpose of impacting others and when we share and debate, community is shaped and formed (this is perhaps the greatest good from the debate itself). As it relates to the interpretation of Scripture, our first port of call is not to find out what a dictionary has to say about it. Our primary question of the Biblical text is not, "What does this story mean?" but "How does this story act upon people?" These are the kinds of questions we need to be asking as we develop a Christian ethic of story.

Now we have identified two dangers: the danger of a protective position and the danger of indecisiveness. The final danger relates to the first two and it centers on the moralization of the Bible. One of the simple arguments against *Harry Potter* is that the Bible is pretty clear about the people of God's association with evil, so stay away. Systematic lists are developed to outline all the chapters and verses that speak to this issue of association with evil. But we need to go a bit deeper here (since we've already started the process of examining what the Bible is and is not). Is the Bible merely something we read in snippets to determine answers to ethical problems? Is it something that we Google for keywords and then pull all of those references together under the heading of a moral? The danger with our Evangelical reading of the Bible (and this is

certainly true for children's ministry) is to read a passage of Scripture and treat it like something from Aesop's Fables where at the end we say, "And the moral of the story is [insert virtue here]..." It is imperative for all followers of Jesus and communities of faith to develop an ethic of story to be sure, but that development needs to solidify the role and position of the Bible in the ethic itself.

Where does the Bible fit in? In order to determine this, we must look to a different story, the story of God (remember, the Gospel we referred to earlier). This is THE story. And it is a story with dramatic and everlasting implications for you and me – this is the story of salvation or salvation history. The story is not just the focus on Jesus, that is the climax of salvation history, that's the zenith of the story God is telling. The story begins "In the beginning" and continues to the present. This is the story we must look to, not for morals but for transforming truth. Is it right to deduce, "I have all of these verses that refer to witches so Christians should not read *Harry Potter*."? Please use caution when using God's revelation to humanity, the great story of redemption, of exile and restoration, of the in-breaking of the God-man into human history to police literature on moral grounds. If you put your mind to it and work with the community of faith, you'll find that there is more to it than a choice between reading *Harry Potter* or not.

This position unfortunately leads to more questions than answers, like how can we hold the teaching of Scripture in tension with culture? It is culture and "the world" that we are all so worried about in the first place. This is the part where we put our faith into practice. And I need to tell you that learning to walk in the way of Jesus is about living as Jesus did, so decisions are made and beliefs are structured and here is where doctrine comes into play.

Let's move to some conclusions here: A decision about the ethics of story must find truth in THE story of Scripture. When we begin to look at the specific case of *Harry Potter*, we need to examine if in the story of *Harry Potter* are there any distortions of Scripture? Where does it move directionally? And how does it relate to the direction God wants you and I to move (given to us with Scripture)? In order to address some of these issues, let us turn our attention to mathematics.

Bounded set theory is a mathematical principle that encompasses and describes two kinds of sets, a bounded set and a centered set (see diagram 1). A bounded set has a finite size and shape. It is easy to define what data is in and what data is out of the set. A centered set is about motion and data on the move towards or away from the center point.

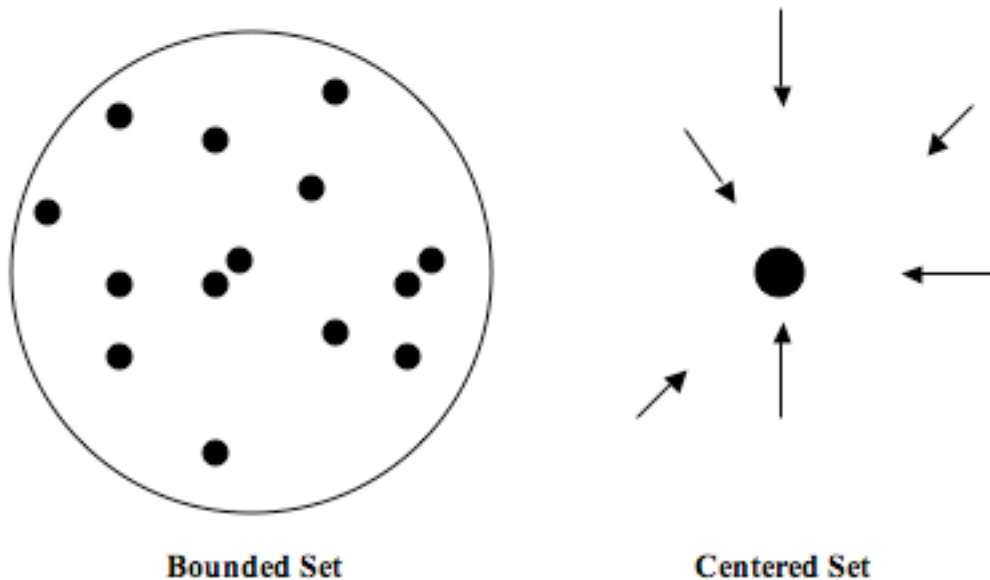


Diagram 1

Let's link this to the issue of ethical, moral, and theological differences. Most of us approach these areas inside a bounded set paradigm. Think of all the points inside the circle as different fixed points of view. Research studies show that there are over 33,000

denominations in the world, each claiming to be the closest representation of what God wants for his church.³ When we enter into these areas from a centered set paradigm, we do so by acting the way the apostle Paul suggests, by putting Christ at the center. We are designed to move closer and closer to Christ just as the arrows move towards the center of the set. This is the challenge we face as we turn to the issue of story.

When we look at story, we can see all sorts of layers to the story: setting, plot, characters, history, motives, ethics, etc... The same is true when we look at ourselves. Think of all the different story levels you represent: your Christian heritage, the story of your childhood (however that happened), family, relatives, church, and more. We all have stories both pretty and ugly. We have stories of our time in school and our identity in a school context (did you keep up, were you pressured, your friends, relationships, online influences). We are full of story components. When we come to evaluate a story, each of our story layers will impact our interpretation. Earlier we discussed the two options in a debate. As the two sides get to know one another, they will reveal their personal story layers and this creates community! The general weakness of academia is that it is not done in community. As you come to a decision about story and you get to the point where you are holding onto a form of interpretation, you must be cognizant of the story layers that inform that interpretation.

As we read story, we do so subjectively. We come to the text with a distinct and unique worldview. It should change us (even if it is ever so slight) and once the change happens, our worldview shifts! Then we come to the text again and we are different. It's not a circular thing, perpetually going around and around as so often happens in debate.

³ Barrett, David B. "Denominations," in *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World*, ed. David B. Barrett, George T. Kurian, and Todd M. Johnson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001): 16.

It is a spiral. We loop up and shift direction and loop down to the text and turn upward anew. The very text that needs interpreting is the text that gives you the tools to construct the story universe that helps you interpret it. As we seek to develop a Christian ethic of story, we must realize that such an ethic is in motion and the directionality is crucial.

Let's finally turn back to the direction God has set up for humanity and the issue of purpose. Humanity was created with a relational purpose, to know and glorify the Creator. Remarkably, all human beings are created in the likeness of the Creator (Genesis 1:26-28). God created humanity with a living soul, a mortal body, an active mind, a malleable spirit, and a passionate heart (Genesis 2:7, Genesis 3:19, Romans 7:25, Psalm 31:5, Ephesians 6:6). God chose to create humanity to reflect His image and to give Him glory (Isaiah 43:7, Ephesians 1:11-12, Revelation 4:11). God takes pleasure when humanity fulfills this purpose and grieves over those who fail (Isaiah 62:3-5, 59:2). God desires humanity to be in relationship with Him, to pursue God above anything else (Psalm 84:1-2, 10).

So, given the purpose for which humanity was created by God (the author and finisher of THE story), where does the story of *Harry Potter* fit? In my own reading of the *Harry Potter* series, the story itself brought me into greater relationship with God. I was moved by the characters and the struggle between good and evil. I found it wonderful that Harry never defeated Voldemort through the use of superior magic, but through virtues like friendship and passion. By the time you get to the final book, Scripture is quoted and it is done so without distorting it for evil purposes. The defeat of Lord Voldemort is a great picture of the eschaton (the last things when THE story comes

to a close and new beginning) where truly and definitively “the last enemy defeated is death” (1 Corinthians 15:26).

The story of God is not just a trite phrase, it encompasses the history of a God who created the world and humankind, judged sin, covenanted with and redeemed a people, died and rose again for all of humanity, and then turned the tables by inviting us to take part in the story itself. It is the story in which we are invited to actively participate and see completed. The story surpasses divisions of chapter and verse in the Bible, for throughout the entirety of Scripture God’s story unfolds. It is the big picture of all God has done and is going to do in the history of history.

My children are fascinated by stories. My daughter Isabel, now three and a half years old, often urges me, “Daddy, tell me the story of when I was a baby,” “Tell me the story of when you went to the park with Mommy.” I too, share a fascination for story. From an early age I wanted to be part of something larger than myself, so as I read Tolkien and Lewis and Encyclopedia Brown I was taken up in causes and epics that captured my imagination whether it was to save Middle Earth, overthrow the White Witch, or figure out Bugs Meany’s latest vengeful act.

I grew up in the church with the distinct calling from an early age to serve in pastoral ministry. I remember going to Career Day at our midweek church club when I was eight years old. I noticed that all the other boys were dressed as police officers, firemen, or athletes. I however, wore my Sunday best and carried a Bible because that is what pastors do and I knew that I was going to be a pastor. I never strayed from this calling and in that discipline and commitment to God and the church experienced the

synergy of joining a cause larger than my own existence. The more I studied and learned about the Bible, I fell deeply in love with the story of God.

Within this bailiwick the different strands of theology, ethics, and doctrine come together united by the story God is telling. The beauty of this powerful motif is that God is not just the originator of the story itself, but God inserts Himself into the story along the way whether powerfully through His presence with His people or in the person of Jesus Christ. My ministry challenge is to faithfully attend to the story of God and to share it with families. As I grow in knowledge and understanding of who God is and what God has done, I am better able to share God's story as God commanded. This is precisely what an ethic of story is all about.

Matthew Guevara is a proud husband and father. Matt serves as a children's pastor in St. Charles, IL at Christ Community Church leading the development of teaching resources and media. Matt will be graduating in May 2009 with a graduate degree in Children's and Family Ministry. You'll often find Matt tweeting (@mattguevara), blogging (corycenter.org), laughing at his own jokes, or goofing around on his iPhone. He wrote this article as a response to a high school student debate on the Harry Potter series designed and directed by his older brother John – who is still afraid of Lamb Chops, as he well should be.