HOW TO DEAL WITH

: LOOKING AT BOTH SIDES OF THE STORY

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How to Deal with Harry Potter: Looking at Both Sides of the Story

Throughout the years, the church has had to deal with many difficult issues. Today, one of these issues comes in the form of a dark-haired, green-eyed wizard who lives in the pages of a popular children’s book series, Harry Potter. The Harry Potter books introduce the reader to a world of wizards and witches which parallels the Muggle (non-magic) world. Harry Potter, the hero, is a young, coming-of-age wizard, and the books detail his seven years of training at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Raised by his Muggle relatives after the evil wizard Lord Voldemort killed his parents and attempted to murder him, Harry only finds out about his past just after his 11th birthday. Once at school, he stumbles through many misadventures with his friends Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger.

Children around the world have become enamored with the young Mr. Potter, while many Christian parents question the content of the books. Is it really good for children to be reading about witchcraft and wizardry, even in the form of fiction? What kind of morals, values, and lessons do the books teach? Is the content of the books appropriate for children? Two authors, Richard Abanes and Connie Neal, have written books dealing with how Christianity should deal with Harry Potter. Abanes’ book, Harry Potter and the Bible: The Menace behind the Magick, carefully and thoroughly investigates the link between Harry Potter and occultism, and takes a stand against the popular series. Abanes is a contemporary Christian writer who has written many books about cults, the occult and world religions, and has written for many Christian magazines. He also has experience as a minister, teacher, and worship leader.
Connie Neal takes a different approach to dealing with the Harry Potter series. In her book, *What’s a Christian to do with Harry Potter?*, Neal tries to answer many of the questions that plague Christian parents when dealing with the Potter series. She also skillfully presents valid arguments for both sides of the controversy, and urges readers to keep an open mind and refrain from judging fellow Christians based on their opinion about Harry Potter. Connie Neal has written extensively on the Harry Potter debate, as well as other subjects. She is a veteran church staff youth pastor and seasoned speaker. Mrs. Neal is also a wife and mother of three school-age children.

This review is a comparative look at two very different views about the same controversial subject. *Harry Potter and the Bible: The Menace behind the Magick*, written by Richard Abanes and published in 2001 by Horizon Books, provides a very negative argument against the Potter series. *What’s a Christian to do with Harry Potter?*, written by Connie Neal and published in 2001 by Waterbrook Press, presents a very positive approach to dealing with Harry Potter. Both books have strong and weak points, as will be exhibited in the three sections of the paper: Abstract, Analysis, and Application. This review will present the premise of each book, contrast the different approaches to the Harry Potter controversy and the scripture used to fortify their arguments, identify each author’s strengths and weaknesses, and comment on how the books have affected me personally.

Abstract

In the introduction to his book, Abanes presents eight questions that he hopes to answer concerning Christianity and Harry Potter throughout his books. Some of these
include: “Are the Potter books harmless fantasy novels fit for adults and children alike? Or do they contain spiritually dangerous material that could ultimately lead youth down the road to occultism? Does J.K. Rowling present a “moral” world consistent with Christianity? Or do her novels promote unbiblical values and unethical behavior, camouflaged beneath a whimsical mask?” (Abanes 6) He divides his book into two parts. The first examines the Potter series, each book first summarized and then scrutinized. The second part provides an overview of issues that relate to Rowling’s books, such as occultism in society, fantasy in Christian literature, the controversy surrounding the use of Harry Potter in public schools, and a clear explanation of why God is against occultism and where it is condemned in the Bible. (7)

Neal approaches the subject of Harry Potter in a different manner. In her introduction, she states that she hopes to “help you sort out facts from fiction, reality from rumors, and provide trustworthy information to make you knowledgeable about the Harry Potter series and the related debate.” (Neal 1) She also clearly states that she “…aim[s] to help you become clearheaded, calm, confident, and peaceful with regard to the issues being raised about Harry Potter, whatever your personal convictions may be now or after you finish this book… all within a scriptural framework that uphold the truth of the Bible and our devotion to God’s Word as the absolute standard for our lives and choices.” (1) Neal breaks her book down into eleven chapters, each dealing with a different part of the Christianity vs. Potter controversy. As she sorts fact from fiction, Neal also adds valuable advice about the dangers of the occult, divisions within the church, and how to use Harry Potter as a tool to teach children spiritual truths. (Table of Contents)
Analysis

While solidly written and obviously well researched, *Harry Potter and the Bible* has some serious flaws in its content. Richard Abanes, the author, goes to great lengths to defend his opinion that the Potter series is not suitable for Christians and has no redeeming merits. He criticizes Rowling for using historical characters, like Nicholas Flamel (a French alchemist who allegedly succeeded in making the Philosopher’s Stone in the late 1300’s) and Adalbert Waffling (a reference to Archbishop Adalbert of Magdeburg, a French pseudo-mystic who lived during the eighth century) in her novels, claiming that while the books do not teach “precise doctrines of witchcraft, nor do they explicitly instruct children…the allusions could easily stir a child’s curiosity about occultism…” (Abanes 24)

Abanes also twists around events in the Potter books in order to support his theories. For example, in chapter five, Abanes attacks fortune-telling and spiritualism, which is introduced in the third book of the Potter series as one of the required classes, Divination. He states that Harry makes an accurate prediction during his final Divination exam, which must be “Rowling’s way of showing readers that her lead character is one of those rare “True Seers.” (Abanes 90) However, according to the story, Harry makes up his prediction because he sees nothing in his crystal ball. “Harry bent over the crystal ball and stared…but nothing happened. He … decided to pretend.” (Rowling *Azkaban* 322-323)

Abanes makes the unfortunate mistake of refusing to consider alternative viewpoints and/or approaches to dealing with the Harry Potter debate. He is obsessed with finding the cult in everything, whether it is there or not. He is actually comparative
in his single-mindedness to a character in book four, named Mad-Eye Moody, a former Auror (or spy for the Ministry of Magic) who “retired (from the Ministry) when (he was) no longer to able to tell the difference between a handshake and an attempted murder.” (Rowling Goblet 203) His book is only effective in widening the gap between Christians who support the books and those who do not because he colors all of his arguments with his personal bias. Abanes tries to cram his opinion down the reader’s throat with biased support and off-the-topic ventures into vague references to witchcraft, the occult, and paganism. His repeated use of law creates a negative tone that is sustained throughout the book, which was not his intent. He did thoroughly support all of his arguments, but in such a way that it was almost offensive to anyone with a different opinion.

*What’s a Christian to do with Harry Potter?* is a refreshing read after the abusive nature of Abanes’ novel. Connie Neal provides a helpful and insightful look at the Potter controversy for Christian parents. She also understands the effects the argument about Harry Potter has had on the Christian community. At the end of chapter one she writes “This is not just an academic debate; it confronts us where we live and work, and it matters because it will influence people we love in important ways.” (Neal 30) With this simple statement, Neal cuts to the heart of the issue: the controversy that surrounds Harry Potter has a little to do with the dangers of the occult, and much more to do with the divisions it is causing within the church.

In her third chapter, Neal expounds on whether the Potter books conform to standard forms of fantasy children’s literature. She feels that most parents allow their children to read some books involving magic because it is fantasy and will be understood in that context; if the Potter books can be categorized as such, it may help to put some
parental fears to rest. Next she points out the strong points of the Harry Potter books; why they appeal to children. This section (chapter 4) is especially helpful in understanding why the books are so popular. Neal identifies eight specific needs in a child’s life that the Harry Potter books speak to:

- hope that comes in the form of wishes that might come true
- a sense of control or empowerment
- self-esteem that comes from accomplishment
- affirmation of their emotions and tools to help deal with them
- knowledge that they can face fear and conquer it
- a strong sense of identity, of belonging, and of destiny
- love that is found in loving families
- the company of good friends

(Neal 65)

For each category, she provides examples of how the Harry Potter stories identify with theses needs, and provide for them. For example, Neal writes about a child’s necessity for a loving family. This basic need provides kids with empathy for Harry, who never knew his parents. “His longing for his parents is mirrored in the longing all children have for a loving relationship with their own parents.” (Neal 81) Children also see a model of love in the Weasley family; they may not have much money, but they have enough love for their large family and Harry as well. The stories do an excellent job of identifying with children who struggle with feelings of abandonment or loneliness due to a disruptive home life. They show that Harry finds a place to belong within two “families,” the Weasley family and the family of students at Hogwarts, even though his parents are dead.
The final chapters provide biblical insight into dealing with Harry Potter as well as disagreements within the church. Pages 92, 93 and 99 do a very good job of presenting the reader with Bible passages and notations that can serve as a guide for Christian decision-making. Both sections, which are taken from Romans 14-15 and 1 Corinthians 8-10, deal with Christian freedom. Some Christians have more freedom than others because of their faith. When this happens, those who have the freedom are not to flaunt it or condemn those who do not. Neither should either side provoke each other or be insensitive. It is most important to remember that “the kingdom of God is not a matter of what we conclude on disputable matters.” (Neal 93)

The most important section of the book is chapter ten: “Using Harry Potter to help kids grow in goodness.” (Neal 181) Neal draws interesting parallels between the moral and educational development of Hogwarts students and the moral development and growth in goodness of Christians, which can be found in Ephesians. We are adopted into God’s family, much as the students are adopted into their houses at school. Like the students, we maintain free will. All of us are given gifts necessary for the building up of the entire body; much like each student has special abilities and strengths. We are given a list of things God expects us to avoid, as well as authority figures to whom we should give respect; comparatively, Hogwarts students are expected to respect and obey their teachers as well as avoid actions or items that are forbidden to them. Finally, as Christians we are instructed to “Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes,” (Ephesians 4:24), which is similar to the training Hogwarts provides so that students are able to defend themselves and others against the Dark Arts and evil in general.
Overall, Connie Neal provides a good balance of law and gospel in her book. She does not hide the opinions of others, but addresses both sides of the Harry Potter matter. Her book is especially helpful in assisting the Christian in making a difficult decision, not only about Harry Potter, but about tough issues in general. She was very successful in thoroughly addressing the issues she set out to analyze and providing a solid theological basis for her arguments.

Application

I am an avid reader of all books, and I particularly enjoyed the Harry Potter books. However, I never really understood why they presented such a problem to the church. After reading these two very different books, I have learned a lot about why people have reservations about the books. I was very pleased with the way Connie Neal presented her material; she has showed me how I, as a Christian, can approach the subject of Harry Potter without giving offense to others. I learned the most from her, especially on how to use the books as tools to teach biblical truths to children.

I was less impressed with Richard Abanes book. I even wonder if he read the Harry Potter books in their entirety before writing his book; some of the examples he cited were either out of context or obviously wrong. However, it did open my eyes to how strongly some people feel about keeping Harry Potter away from children.

Overall, my opinion has remained the same about Harry Potter; I believe that the books are wonderful pieces of literature, and I plan to continue reading them. However, I am now more aware of how to deal with this issue in a loving and Christian manner. I am also better prepared to make a stand for my opinion without causing harm or offense to someone else’s faith.
Concluding Thoughts

Both of these books presented suitable arguments concerning an issue that is very relevant to Christianity today. I would recommend the Neal book over the Abanes book, because of its practical application of Christian values and beliefs, and its unbiased analysis of both the positive and negative aspects of the Harry Potter series. I would also recommend that one read the Harry Potter books, or at least know a little bit about them, before forming opinions about them. This will help a person decide what parts they like and don’t like and why, rather than trusting information from someone else. While this particular controversy is only temporary, there will always be something trying to divide the church. I am thankful that God has given a guide to dealing with conflict within the church which is universal, and applicable even to children’s literature.

Bibliography


*While I did not cite these sources in my paper, the background for many events, persons, and terms are in them, as well as general information presented throughout the paper can be found in them.*