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THE COMPLEXITIES OF CENSORSHIP IN SECULAR TEXTBOOKS

Many Christian schools currently use secular textbooks because they believe these books reflect the greatest available scholarship, backed by modern educational theory and expertise. Ironically, recent concerns voiced by secular educators reveal the opposite to be true. Accusations of censorship, which on the surface may seem admirable to Christian audiences, actually reveal the depth of philosophical problems inherent in the secular textbook industry. The controversy over censorship in modern secular textbooks shows that

these texts are inappropriate for Christian schools.

What the critics describe as the “sanitization” of modern textbooks, at first, seems to be a positive trend for Christian users of these texts. The most-often cited example of the tremendous influence of censorship in secular textbooks is a conservative Christian organization in Texas, known as Educational Research Analysts, founded over 40 years ago by concerned Christian parents, Mel and Norma Gabler.¹

¹ See their website at www.textbookreviews.org.

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In This Issue

**Breaking the Code
Through Thoughtful
Reading**

by Nancy Lohr
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BREAKING THE CODE THROUGH THOUGHTFUL READING

Have you wrestled a good book lately? That is, have you deliberately grappled with the text, debated its concepts, and identified its real message? Have you come to the conclusion that, based on some criteria, you like the book—or not?

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The concept of evaluation, or thoughtful scrutiny, is referred to throughout Scripture as one aspect of a believer's growth toward biblical maturity. The writer of Hebrews 5:12–14, the milk and meat passage, says that discernment of good and evil is developed through practice or “by reason of use.”

Proverbs 24:30–32 uses the example of a lazy man who lacks good judgment—a poor role model—to provide instruction. “I went by the field of the slothful, and by the vineyard of the man void of understanding; and, lo, it was all grown over with thorns, and nettles had covered the face thereof, and the stone wall thereof was broken down. Then I saw, and considered it well: *I looked upon it, and received instruction.*” (emphasis added)

In Paul's closing instructions to the church in Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 5:21) he simply tells them to “prove all things”—to examine everything with great care. Paul also writes about this topic in Ephesians 5:6–17 and in Philippians 1:10.

Each of these passages touches on some aspect of the biblical directive to examine, to evaluate, and to learn from the various aspects of this world we live in. And the sto-

ries held between two covers of a book are no exception—for us or for our students.

The Standard

It is common to gather information about a book from the opinions of friends and colleagues or from published thoughts penned in a review. Those opinions may be fine and even helpful, but in 2 Corinthians 10:12 Paul warned the Corinthians, and us, against “measuring themselves by themselves” and “comparing themselves among themselves,” concluding that those who rely on a human standard “are not wise.” The basis for evaluating other books begins with a constant and continuous study of The Book. The only reliable standard for the believer is Scripture itself.

When the writers of Scripture penned God-breathed words, they wrote widely—of eternity past to eternity future, of battles and births, obedience and obstinance. They wrote accounts of real people; they recorded the parables that came from the lips of our Savior; they wrote the most beautiful literature known to man. And there is not a higher standard against which to evaluate a story.

The storied accounts of the Old Testament include exciting plots, peopled by actual characters not unlike folks we may know. There is sin, providing literary conflict, that sets each story in action; and before the conflict rests in resolution, and within varying time-lines, that sin is addressed.

In one instance Jonah receives a command, runs the other way, and begins to receive the consequence in the space of three short verses. His whole story is a narrative told in five chapters, woven into the fabric of the Old Testament. In another instance a longer story is used to tell of Joseph, ill-treated by his brothers and sold into slavery. Long years pass as Joseph comes to manhood and becomes the instrument of God used to deliver his family. His brother Reuben's guilt begins at the pit and ends—or is resolved—in a palace many, many years later, recorded over a broad span of chapters in the book of Genesis. While the length and delivery of these stories differ, the resolution of sin—the conflict—is true to the Book as it must be in lesser books as well.

The parables of the New Testament demonstrate our Lord's creativity as He crafted each parable in a unique way to gain the attention of the listeners. Sometimes He told the story along with the lesson to be learned. Sometimes He spoke in metaphors that required the listener to “read between the lines,” and sometimes He told the story but waited to give the explanation to certain listeners at another time. As these parables unfold, we see that some seeds flourished, and some withered and died; some wedding guests were welcomed, and some were turned away; some servants were faithful, and some were not. When

Christ used the vehicle of story, He set the stage for contemplation that led to biblical understanding, and the same should be true of a worthy book.

We can learn much from these scriptural examples. There are good characters (role models) and bad characters; there are good actions and bad but all for our instruction. Some messages (themes) are clearly spelled out while others are set in terms that require the reader to evaluate and draw a conclusion. Biblical narratives demonstrate variety and creativity, and they offer many different topics to interest a range of readers. There is all of this and more in the inspired Word, the Book that is the guide for believers in all things. And all of these concepts can direct our thinking in our other reading.

An Application

Let's consider *The Choctaw Code*, published by JourneyForth Books in 2006, over forty years after its original release in 1961 by Whittlesey House. Both then and now this book was viewed as a historically accurate, engaging piece of fiction for young people. The writing is beautiful in and of itself, and it presents a reliable account of life in 1890s Oklahoma that is fully consistent with a Christian worldview. JourneyForth publishes two types of youth fiction: that which is explicitly Christian and that which, while not overtly Christian, is consistent with or supportive of the absolute truth of Scripture. *The Choctaw Code* is of this second type. Both types of fiction have their place in the overall growth of young readers, especially when the story is considered from its intended perspective.

The Choctaw Code is set in the 1890s some fifty years after the historic Trail of Tears when the Choctaw people have settled in a portion of Oklahoma. Fifteen-year-old Tom Baxter and his parents have moved from St. Louis to Atoka where Harvey Baxter will become the railroad stationmaster; Hannah Baxter will care for her family, and—since school is out—young Tom will help with chores around their house (p. 3) until he is given leave to explore the hills and countryside.

Biblical narratives demonstrate variety and creativity, and they offer many different topics to interest a range of readers.

Early on Tom meets Jim Moshulatubee (p. 6), a Choctaw Indian, whose future (p. 30) poses a challenging reality to Tom—the conflict that drives the plot. In accordance with the Choctaw code, Jim has been sentenced to die because of his part in a fight that led to a man's death. Jim has one year to live free, making the most he can of his final year, and then he will give himself up to the Choctaw sheriff. According to Scripture the days of every man are numbered, much as Jim's are in this story, and his illustration of spending each day nobly is fine food for thought.

It is understandable that Tom, like some readers, will find this inevitable conclusion troublesome. It is understandable that some will want to find a way to change the expected outcome, but an accurate portrayal of history demands that even the hard parts are presented honestly, not gratuitously and not explicitly, but truthfully.

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Not only do the Gablers themselves claim tremendous influence, but also secular observers agree that their impact on Texas textbooks—and therefore, the nation’s—is profound. Diane Ravitch, well-known educator and author of *The Language Police*, a renowned exposé of textbook censorship, describes the extent of the Gablers’ influence: “Since the 1960s, any publisher that expected to win adoption of their textbooks in Texas had to anticipate that the Gablers would review the contents and values in their books and teachers’ guides on a line-by-line basis. Knowing this, publishers engaged in self-censorship to head off possible confrontations with such conservative critics.”²

The Gablers’ method for exerting conservative influence was to use their state’s public textbook adoption hearings to vocalize their objections to the textbooks being considered for use in Texas. These hearings offer private citizens the opportunity to raise objections about textbooks, to which the publishers must publicly respond. Trying to avoid controversy in order to sell books, the publishers would often comply with the Gablers’ demands.

However admirable the Gablers’ objectives and results, their methods opened the door to other interest groups who also want to wield influence over the textbooks used in public schools. Although Christians may respect the conservative influence of the Gablers, we need to beware the influence of groups that do not share our values. Diane Ravitch contends that “Whereas the right gets topic control [of textbooks], the left gets control of

language and images.”³ Although the state adoption proceedings in Texas wield conservative influence over textbooks, the same proceedings in California encourage liberal control over the same publishers.

The result of the influence of these politically correct interest groups is a closely followed collection of “bias guidelines”⁴—used by educational publishers, test development companies, states’ adoption rules, and scholarly and professional organizations—that severely restrict the use of language in secular textbooks. Ravitch explains that “the guidelines regulate what writers are permitted to say about specific groups in society, including women, the elderly, people with disabilities, and members of racial and ethnic minorities. Anything that is published in textbooks must be satisfactory to representatives of these groups [which] must be presented only in a positive light.”⁵

These guidelines have become increasingly complicated and dictatorial, to the point that they include a list of over 500 words that are banned from all textbooks. For example, to satisfy the feminists, according to Ravitch, “words that include the prefix or suffix *man* or *men* must be excluded; such words as *manpower*, *chairman*, *forefathers*, *freshman*, *businessmen*, and *mankind* are banned.”⁶

And, the guidelines are so contradictory that the publishers have difficulty adhering. For example, Ravitch ex-

³ Ravitch, p. 24.

⁴ The most influential of these bias guidelines is published by McGraw-Hill, entitled *Reflecting Diversity: Multicultural Guidelines for Educational Publishing Professionals* (1993).

⁵ Ravitch, pp. 32–34.

⁶ Ravitch, p. 38.

plains that “all educational materials [must] have a fair and balanced representation of people with disabilities. They must be shown with devices such as walkers, crutches, canes, wheelchairs, and braces.” However, none of these people portrayed with such devices can be elderly—because that image would imply a negative stereotype of the aged, which must always be portrayed as “healthy, happy, and able to run a marathon.”⁷

The impact of these various interest groups affects textbooks in all disciplines. John Hubisz, reporting the results of an analysis of middle school science textbooks conducted by the American Association of Physics Teachers, concludes that “political correctness is often more important than scientific accuracy: Middle-school text publishers now employ more people to censor books for content that might offend any organized lobbying group than they do to check facts.”⁸

But it is undoubtedly the literature and history textbooks that earn the closest evaluation by political activists. For example, literary selections chosen must reflect racial balance as reflected by Census Bureau statistics. In fact, Ravitch explains that “most classic literature [anything written before 1970] is unacceptable when judged by the new rules governing references to gender, ethnicity, age, and disability.”⁹

However, the most recent public battles have involved history textbooks. Gilbert Sewall of the American Textbook Council testified to the Senate in 2003 about the “disturbing” “col-

⁷ Ravitch, pp. 38–39.

⁸ John Hubitz, “Middle-School Texts Don’t Make the Grade,” *Physics Today*, Vol. LVI, No. 5 (May 2003), p. 53.

⁹ Ravitch, *The Language Police*, p. 25.

² Diane Ravitch, *The Language Police* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), p. 105.

laboration of educational publishers with pressure groups.” He described publishers who “cater to pressure groups for whom history textbook content is an extension of a broader political or cultural cause. They make books whose content is meant to suit the sensitivities of groups and causes more interested in self-promotion than in historical fact, scholarly appraisal, or balance.”¹⁰

Of particular concern to Sewall is what he describes as Islamic political action through the “virtually unchecked power” of the Council on Islamic Education over leading publishers of history textbooks. He argues that “for more than a decade, history textbook editors have done the

¹⁰Gilbert T. Sewall, Testimony before the U.S. Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee Hearing on Intellectual Diversity (September 24, 2003) <http://www.historytextbooks.org/senate.htm>.

Council’s bidding, and as a result, history textbooks accommodate Islam on terms that Islamists demand.”¹¹

The latest tumult over history textbooks involved two Hindu groups who just this year demanded numerous changes in textbooks adopted in California. These two foundations, the Vedic Foundation and the Hindu Education Foundation, submitted 500 proposed changes to the textbook approval committee in an effort to see textbooks portray Hindu faith and culture more sympathetically.¹²

Whether their influences are positive or negative, conservative or liberal, political pressure groups have captured

¹¹Gilbert T. Sewall, *Islam and the Textbooks* (New York: American Textbook Council, 2003), pp. 25–26.

¹²Charles Burrell, “Hindu Groups Lose Fight to Change Textbooks,” *San Francisco Chronicle* (March 10, 2006).

control of secular textbook publishers in our country. These censorship methods have created books with contradictory messages and dangerous philosophical undertones that have also robbed the texts of literary merit and legitimate diversity. With such political forces haggling over the content and language of these textbooks throughout every discipline, it is clear that these books cannot be the best option for Christian schools. We need books that are free from political and philosophical influences that contradict the beliefs and values we hold dear, but we also need books that promote literacy and appreciation for the world as God created it.

Dr. Rhonda Galloway teaches English at Bob Jones University.

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Not all works of fiction end with “happily ever after,” and that is just as truthful as the fact that not all of life ends “happily ever after.” There are hard consequences and difficult realities that a reader can mull over when encountered in a story, perhaps before that same reader needs such knowledge for real life. And certainly in this, the Christian reader has the advantage by virtue of having biblical answers to the troubles of man.

So what about using a heavy or troubling topic to drive the plot?

In this story a man has died, and a murderer will be executed—a clear illustration of both the biblical principle of sowing and reaping and God’s mandate for murderers. The young reader may also recognize that this story conflict refers to the larger concept of capital punishment, a difficult topic, especially when it is viewed through the lens of current culture. Thankfully, for the believer, God set down the punishment for murder in Genesis 9:6: “Whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed.” The topic is large and the subtleties myriad, but God’s Word is clear. Is it comfortable to consider a result so weighty, so final? No, not by any means, but it is a biblical consequence, and as such it is worthy of consideration.

What about presenting a main character like Jim in a positive light? What about an impressionable boy like

Tom spending much time with a man known to be a murderer? Any well-developed literary character will have some concerns, some indication of sinfulness, and some areas for growth. So this question might be better stated as “How bad is too bad?” Jim owns up to his own anger (p. 33), but the story goes beyond that one moment, showing Jim to be an honest, diligent, and approachable man. Jim teaches Tom careful stewardship of the woods he hikes and the animals he hunts. He realizes that Tom has disobeyed his mother, saying, “I’m a little surprised your folks would let you keep coming here now” (p. 35). And he helps Tom admit his own disobedience, going so far as making the dif-

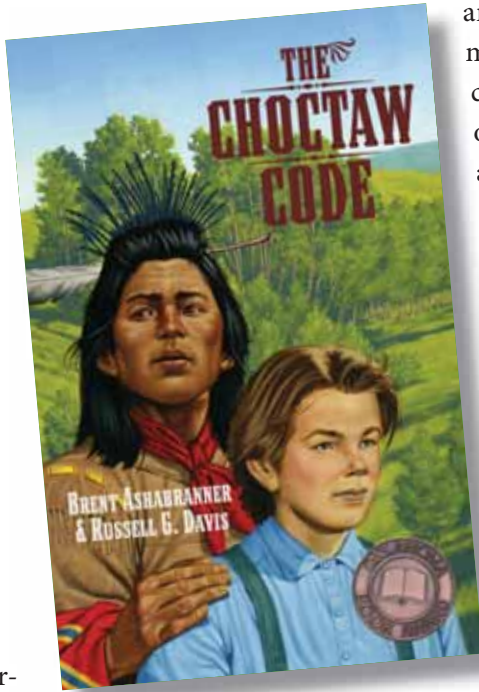
ficult trip to Tom’s home on this day to meet Mrs. Baxter. The quiet reproof of glances that follows is so gentle as to appear almost nonexistent. It is a lovely parallel to kind reproof from our heavenly Father, and what reader among us cannot appreciate that?

What about including elements like a practicing medicine man? Chapter 11 finds Jim and Tom returning from the Choctaw Council, and they come upon the cabin of an elderly ailing woman (p. 85). In this historically accurate scene the chanting of a medicine man comes from within the cabin, while tribal dancers circle the cabin outside. But curiously enough, Jim, the honorable Choctaw, does not join them.

When Tom asks why, Jim responds that he doesn’t “believe it will help a sick person to get well” (p. 86). A few paragraphs later he tells Tom that he will bring the missionary doctor to help. Jim does not believe in the power of the medicine man, but he does believe that the missionary doctor can help. This is an interesting and plausible possibility. Does this make Jim a Christian? No, but it does show the influence of a missionary, and however faintly, it may give some hope that Jim has heard the gospel as well.

What if Jim is not saved and is presenting himself for a death that will lead to hell? This is a big concern that a book like *The Choctaw Code* will raise. Many readers want a story to end with a character’s salvation or his sanctification, two very worthy themes. But not the *only* two worthy themes. Other themes were written of in Scripture, and so other themes can be used in a work of historical fiction as well. Jim is a noble character well suited to this work of historical fiction. The reader is never told whether or not Jim is a believer, for that is not the focus of this story. Rather, this is an interesting and accurate slice of history that shows a man who, like us, walks on feet of clay. He demonstrates honor and integrity in the face of difficult circumstances that are worthy lessons all on their own. This aspect of the story further illustrates the biblical principle that even lost men—if indeed Jim is lost—bear the image of God (James 3:9) and can act nobly.

What about the use of dated or insensitive terms? The reader may notice some terms that are presently considered politically incorrect. The Civil War is called “The War Between the States” (p. 2), which shows that the au-



thors favor the Confederacy. Had they used the term “The War of Northern Aggression,” the scales would point more to the actions of the Union. Is that a problem? Not necessarily, but such elements show a bias that informs the reader.

The word *Indian* is used throughout in the 1890s setting, as would have been the case at that time, and although *Native American* may be a better term in our present day, its use would diminish the historical accuracy of the story. The Choctaw culture is given appropriate respect, which is an indication that in this context the term *Indian* is not intended to be demeaning. The rich details are included not for the purpose to encourage readers to accept contrary beliefs or practices but rather to flesh out the life and background of the man in the spotlight. Certain terms, especially in historical fiction,

serve as signposts to establish time and place.

***What about the principle of Philip-
pians 4 to think on all things good?***

There is much in this book to commend: Hannah Baxter is a submissive wife. Jim and the Baxters are intelligent, literate people, as can be seen in the well-used books present in both homes. Jim lives by a code of honor and seeks to help Tom do the same. Jim shows a respect for life in hunting for food. Tom exercises diligence in hunting and persistence in learning to build traps. Tom’s parents demonstrate concern for him but allow him room to mature. All of these observations point a reader toward thinking on good things, and each could serve as the topic of an interesting discussion.

***What if the concerns outweigh the
commendations?*** Wrestling with a

book is less about keeping score and more about viewing its text through the lens of Scripture in order to recognize and apply biblical truth. In keeping with Hebrews 5:12–14, the balance of commendable and challenging elements—that is, the “dosage” of concerns—must be directly related to the maturity of the reader. Some may still need milk, some “by reason of use” may be ready for meat, and still others may need something in between. (For further reading go to https://bjupress.com/resources/articles/objectionable_elements.html.) Whether the evaluation of a book leads to the 1 Thessalonians 5:21 instruction to “prove all things” or the Proverbs 24:30–32 to consider a specific man or some other principle of Scripture, if the result is that the reader “looked upon it, and received instruction,”

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then the book is worthy and the evaluation is profitable.

The Choctaw Code has much to commend it: the accurate presentation of a real period of history; the ingenuity and teachable spirit of a young man and the love and warmth of his family; the compassion and support of a small and varied community; but most of all, the example of honor and integrity seen

in one man facing hard circumstances in noble form.

A book that stands up to careful scrutiny has much to offer young people, teachers, and parents, and those who plumb the depths of *The Choctaw Code* will be all the richer for it.

Nancy Lohr is Acquisitions Editor for JourneyForth Books.



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