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CHOOSE YOUR OWN ENCHANTMENT: FREEDOM AND CONSCIENCE IN WHAT WE WATCH

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We must choose wisely which stories we allow to enchant us. Stories are powerful; they can transport us to other worlds and take us into other minds. Like the wardrobe to Narnia or Doctor Who's police box time machine, a story is "bigger on the inside." Time passes differently in stories, and we return to our present reality having perhaps experienced years or lifetimes. A well-made film or television show can touch a heart, change a mind, or redirect a life.

We see the power of stories in the pages of the Bible, which contains many stories and tells the Great Story. The prophet Nathan's tale of a stolen lamb brought King David to repentance (2 Sam. 12). Jesus often taught in parables, delivering down-to-earth stories that are stealth bombers of the human heart, bypassing our defenses by way of the imagination (though our deep bunkers of overfamiliarity often protect us from their full devastating impact).

But stories can have a darker side. Like all human endeavors, we tell stories in the shadow of the fall. It was a story, too, that persuaded Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit: the seductive fantasy whispered by the serpent that we could become like God yet be apart from Him. We become the stories we believe about ourselves, and stories shape the world by shaping the way we see the world, for better and for worse.

How Do We Choose Our Enchantments Wisely? The power of story is the very thing that has sometimes made Christians wary of fiction, especially the visceral potency of the big and small screen. Freedom, not fear, should be the foundation for wise choices as Christians, however. God's grace to us in Christ is the basis for our lives: "It is for freedom that Christ has set you free" (Gal. 5:1 NIV); we are not to burden ourselves with laws by which we seek to establish our own righteousness, or to set down standards for others that are not mandated by Scripture.

This is especially true of questions that the Bible does not address directly; here we have freedom to follow God as we see best, guided by our conscience, our God-given internal sense of right and wrong. Trying to establish strict rules about what media we should consume can become a legalistic attitude like that described in Colossians 2:22–24 — rules that are “based on merely human commands and teachings. Such regulations have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility...but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence” (NIV).

Growing up as a child in a Christian home, my parents kept a careful eye on my viewing habits and drilled me in the need for “discernment.” I sometimes felt as if I needed to be able to give a detailed analysis of everything I watched to prove that I really was being discerning and not being unduly influenced by worldly entertainment.

But there is freedom for Christians simply to *enjoy* a film or show. Storytelling is one of the ways in which we reflect the creativity of our creator God. Making films and television is one of the many methods by which we take the raw materials of God’s creation — light and sound, time and space, human beings as actors — and transform them in our own subcreation. As Joe Rigney argues in *The Things of Earth*, “If culture making describes our contribution to the growth and transformation of culture in fulfilment of God’s mission, then we can now see why the making of culture and the enjoyment of culture are both good gifts from God that we ought to receive gladly and return to him in praise and adoration.”¹ While cultural discernment has a significant place in the Christian life, we must not forget that *enjoyment* of culture also can honor God.

What is more, enjoyment is prior to discernment. In *An Experiment in Criticism*, C. S. Lewis observes, “The first demand any work of art makes upon us is surrender. Look. Listen. Receive. Get yourself out of the way. (There is no good asking first whether the work before you deserves such a surrender, for until you have surrendered you cannot possibly find out.)”² Whatever response we may subsequently make to a story, to truly engage with it, we must first let it weave its spell about us.

But What Does It Mean to Enjoy a Story? Isn’t this kind of surrender dangerous? One church leader argues, “We should not be entertained by the sins for which Christ died.’ Lusting after electronic images, laughing at immorality, becoming discontent with our life circumstances, and filling our minds with anti-Christian messages are sins we must avoid.”³ There are indeed good biblical reasons to limit or lay down our freedoms for Christ’s sake: “If your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away” (Matt. 5:30 NIV) — we must remove from our lives anything that causes us to sin, even if it is something good in and of itself. However, what is a temptation for one person may not be for another; each of us must be fighting and putting to death our own sins, and our consciences will constrain us or give us liberty at different points.

But does our enjoyment of a story that involves characters behaving in a sinful way mean that we are being “entertained by sin”? No story asks us to approve everything that happens in it. Stories rely on tensions — between good and evil, between different characters, between different viewpoints and motivations. Stories

also seek to reflect the world we live in, to imitate both its beauty and the brokenness. The Bible itself records murder, rape, incest, revenge, adultery, and much more, not for our approval but for instruction. The question is, what kind of response is a story inviting you to form as you watch?

Take, for example, the not-at-all explicit scenes of underage sex that made Tim Challies turn off *Stranger Things*.⁴ One of the many domestic subplots interwoven with the mounting creepy goings-on is the relationship between Nancy and her jerk-of-a-boyfriend Steve, who is pressuring her into sleeping with him. Nancy is going along with this against the advice of her best friend Barb. Far from encouraging the audience to approve of or enjoy seeing Nancy and Steve sleeping together, it is a cautionary tale. We are led to see it as foolish behavior (with the act itself intercut with a monster attack for maximum discomfort!), and are shown the negative consequences that result. Watching it is a far cry from simply “enjoying sin”; if anything, we are being warned against it. Narrative intent and overall storyline matter.

Stranger Things's portrayal of Nancy and Steve's relationship over the entire story follows a redemptive arc, albeit a rather muddled one from a Christian moral perspective. But it is possible to form a meaningful response to it only by considering the story as a complete whole. Neither need our response be dictated entirely by the intentions of the writer or director: just as a lustful heart can find cause for sin in G-rated movies, a godly heart can receive the good with gratitude and train itself to hate what's evil, even if being invited to “enjoy sin.”

The most powerful effect that screen narratives have is to shape our hearts and desires by presenting us with images of the good life. In *Desiring the Kingdom*, James K. A. Smith argues that we are teleological creatures, with our loves aimed at particular goals. We are orientated primarily by our *loves*, not our thoughts. As such, “a vision of the good life captures our hearts and imaginations not by providing a set of rules or ideas, but by painting a picture of what it looks like for us to flourish and live well. This is why such pictures are communicated most powerfully in stories, legends, myths, plays, novels, and films rather than dissertations, messages, and monographs.”⁵ The way to resist the siren call of alternative visions is not withdrawal but through our worship and spiritual formation to be more strongly gripped by the great narrative of the gospel so that our vision of Christ's kingdom is more compelling to us.

Watching as Listening as Loving. Finally, perhaps we should think about what we watch more in terms of loving others by receiving their stories. Returning to C. S. Lewis, he observed that “the question ‘What is the good of reading what anyone writes?’ is very like the question ‘What is the good of listening to what anyone says?’....And if it is worth while listening or reading at all, it is often worth doing so attentively.”⁶ Stories are acts of communication by which other human beings both share something of how they see the world to be and offer a vision of how the world *ought* to be. Watching stories can be a way of being “quick to listen,” as James 1:19 instructs us to do. We all have limits in what stories we can bear, limits placed on us by conscience, but we should seek to bear one another's burdens rather than only receive those stories that are

comfortable to us. We may just find that watching good films and television shows opens windows providing new views of the world and expands our vision to see more to love in our neighbors and in God. —*Caleb Woodbridge*

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NOTES

1. Joe Rigney, *The Things of Earth: Treasuring God by Enjoying His Gift* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 147.
2. C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 19.
3. Kurt Gebhards, "Parental Guidance Required: Making Wise Media Choices for You and Your Family" in *Right Thinking in a World Gone Wrong: A Biblical Response to Today's Most Controversial Issues*, ed. John MacArthur (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2009), 55.
4. Tim Challies, "On 'Stranger Things' and Being a Big Prude," September 1, 2016, accessed November 27, 2016, <http://www.challies.com/articles/on-%E2%80%9Cstrangerthings%E2%80%9D-and-being-a-big-prude>.
5. James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview and Cultural Liturgies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 52–53
6. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*, 132.