

RIGHT or WRONG? Censorship

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A church member recently donated a book to our church library. But a question has been raised about the book's appropriateness for the library. If we don't shelve the book, we will be accused of censorship. How should we determine the appropriateness of the book?

Some oppose any form of censorship, based on the idea that each individual is free to define truth for himself or herself. All views are permitted in the marketplace of ideas, because we are all free to select what ideas best suit our individual understanding of truth. Christians, however, do not believe we are free to define truth in terms of what suits us. Instead, we believe the truth of the gospel is what sets us free to live lives as God intended.

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Certainly, some books have no place in a church library, and we are not obligated to accept everything in print. There is room, however, for caution on this matter of censorship, for Christians of goodwill might disagree on the appropriateness of some books. The Apostle Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 13:9-11 that we know in part and prophesy in part. Children immaturely believe their partial grasp on reality can be taken for the whole. Paul argues that we can afford to listen to perspectives other than our own because none of us "knows fully" as we are fully known by God. Obviously,

we might believe differently than some perspectives, but we still may learn and benefit from them. I like what Paul says to the Thessalonians: “Examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:21). Such an admonition requires the capacity for critical engagement with ideas and perspectives that we should neither dismiss out of hand, nor swallow whole-hog.

How might a church exhibit this critical engagement that allows for contrasting views to be represented in a church library? First, a committee representing a cross-section of the congregation should be tasked with (1) determining what criteria will be consulted in evaluating a title’s inclusion, (2) gaining approval of these criteria by the church, (3) making it clear that inclusion in the church’s library does not imply 100 percent endorsement of everything in the book, (4) emphasizing that there is a process of approval and not every book offered for inclusion might be accepted and (5) perhaps establishing certain age restrictions on what books might be available to whom.

With this process, a book still could really cause a stir if included in the church’s library. Such a situation provides a wonderful opportunity for leaders in the church to address what might be controversial issues from the standpoint of Christian faith. Doing such could be an important means by which leaders equip the saints in the practice of critical discernment, helping believers move from child-like thinking to greater Christian maturity.

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Right or Wrong? is sponsored by the T.B. Maston Chair of Christian Ethics

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