LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

The Kabod

Volume 3
Issue 2 *Spring 2017*

Article 1

November 2016

Paper Friends: Honoring God in What You Read

Valerie Pors
Liberty University, vpors@liberty.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/kabod

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citations

MLA:
Pors, Valerie "Paper Friends: Honoring God in What You Read," *The Kabod* 3. 2 (2016) Article 1.
Liberty University Digital Commons. Web. [xx Month xxxx].

APA:
Pors, Valerie (2016) "Paper Friends: Honoring God in What You Read" *The Kabod* 3(2 (2016)), Article 1. Retrieved from http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/kabod/vol3/iss2/1

Turabian:
Pors, Valerie "Paper Friends: Honoring God in What You Read" *The Kabod* 3 , no. 2 2016 (2016) Accessed [Month x, xxxx]. Liberty University Digital Commons.

Valerie Pors

Dr. Marybeth Bagget

English 102-042

15 October 2014

Paper Friends: Honoring God in What You Read

When first meeting a stranger, most people will evaluate his appearance, bearing, and speech and instantly form an opinion. For example, if a stranger appears unkempt, slouches, and drawls, they might hesitate to trust him as much as they would if he were clean-cut, erect, and eloquent. This is because outward appearance suggests inward character, and a person's character indicates how they might treat or influence a friend for either good or ill. After this initial reaction, people will often make one of two choices. In one case, they will judge the person's worthiness solely based upon appearance—either accepting or rejecting the whole. In the other case, they will accept the person without even considering outward appearances. Wayne Booth portrays these two approaches in the selection of friendships—critical censorship and open-armed acceptance—as warring against each other. Yet people would be wise to employ both, accepting the new acquaintance with a willingness to converse, and at the same time critically divining the acquaintance's beliefs, background, and worldview. Only after gaining a true understanding of the person do they either perceive evidence of immorality and walk away, or perceive evidence of virtue and choose to call that man "friend."

A Christian may apply the same method of choosing friends to selecting literature, because many parallels exist between flesh and paper. Long periods of interaction take place with humans and books alike. Additionally, like human companionship, literature has the power of influence. Therefore Christians must, as with fleshly companions, carefully decide when to

promote paper from "acquaintance" to "friend." In this quest, Christians may employ Booth's two approaches, combining both into one powerful tool to select godly paper friends.

In order to project the process of forming human friendships onto the process of evaluating literature, it is important to thoroughly understand the parallels between literature and human beings. One of the most apparent similarities is prolonged companionship. When one sits down to read a book, he commits to hours, days, and even weeks in its company. He will periodically visit, depart, and then return. He will get to know the book as he would a friend. American novelist Harold Brodkey once stated, "Reading is an intimate act, perhaps more intimate than any other human act. I say that because of the prolonged (or intense) exposure of one mind to another that is involved in it, and because it is the level of mind at which feelings and hopes are dealt in by consciousness and words" (qtd. in Booth 168). Brodkey notes that the act of reading has the ability to transmit the content of the author's consciousness to that of the reader because of the length of time spent in mental communion. The same is true of human companions: through conversing they share the content of mind and heart.

Such intimate and lengthy companionships reveal the weight of another connection between friends and literature; namely, the possession of a worldview. Every person and every book has a worldview—a lens which colors the world and influences actions based on a perception of right and wrong. The Christian must carefully consider the worldview of an acquaintance before he commits to friendship, because every worldview influences how a person defines right and wrong. Ray Cotton, in "Morality Apart from God," claims that ". . . the question of right or wrong has everything to do with the origin of our belief, not just the substance of it" (3). Cotton makes the point that it is important not just to understand a person's viewpoint on right and wrong, but also to understand what guides those judgments.

A prospective friend's worldview cannot be overlooked, because both human and literary friends influence one's actions for good or ill. Booth, English professor and author points out that this influence is often subtle: "[O]ur imitations of *narrative* 'imitations of life' are so spontaneous and plentiful that we cannot draw a clear line between what we *are,* in some conception of a "natural," unstoried self, and what we have become as we have first enjoyed, then imitated, and then, perhaps, criticized both the stories and our responses" (228-29). Booth argues that a person often changes his actions in ways so slight that even he may not detect his own response; these borrowed behaviors simply and quietly become part of his identity. Not only do both literature and human friends have influential power, but that power is subtle, warranting care.

Having established shared qualities of time, influence, and worldview, a person must next determine what makes a book or friend good or evil. Karen Swallow Prior, Professor of English at Liberty University, notes that the quantity of negative content is a common litmus test for determining a book's acceptability. However, she claims that a more legitimate concern is the book's viewpoint on that evil. Specifically, if it glamorizes the evil or hides the true nature of the resulting consequences, then the book is unwholesome (15). Supporting this position, Theological researcher Tony Reinke observes that the Bible—man's ultimate standard for good—contains perverse content; Christians therefore must not stigmatize books on this basis alone (124). From the example of the Bible, readers may learn that even if a friend or book speaks of evil, a morally educational and uplifting outcome may justify the content. Thus the way an acquaintance looks upon evil—as either desirable or as negative, yet possessing constructive qualities—determines whether or not the acquaintance proves himself to be a negative force.

Intimately related to a friend's attitude towards evil is his definition of good. Once again, believers may reference the Bible to discover the correct outlook on good. Paul, in his epistle to the Romans, declares, "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but *how* to perform that which is good I find not" (King James Version, Rom. 7.18). In other words, Paul acknowledges that no good exists in man; God is the only source of ultimate good. Therefore, a truly good book or friend must not conform to human standards alone, but must also present good in a way that parallels those biblical attitudes and actions which God affirms as good.

Another key factor in determining the wholesomeness of an acquaintance are his intentions. Booth pioneers this principle in *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction.* He writes,

> Is the pattern of life that this would-be friend offers one that friends might well pursue together? Or is this the offer of a sadist to a presumed masochist? Of a seducer or rapist to a victim? Of the exploiter to the exploited? Is this a friend, a lover, a parent, a prophet, a crony, a co-conspirator, an *agent provocateur*, a bully, a quack therapist, a sycophant? Or perhaps a sidekick, a lackey, a vandal, a bloodsucker, a blackmailer . . . ? (222)

This series of metaphors reveals the gravity of the acquaintance's intentions towards his fellow. Just as humans may display dysfunctional intentions in relationships, literature may also contain subversive motives. Divining underlying motives can immensely aid the Christian in determining the true character of his company-to-be.

The overarching conclusion to ascertaining virtue, then, can be summarized by the simple question, "Does the company have an overall uplifting effect?" In his book *On Moral Fiction*

John Gardener concludes that “television—or any other more or less artistic medium—is good (as opposed to pernicious or vacuous),” and continues:

> …only when it has a clear positive moral effect, presenting valid models for imitation, eternal verities worth keeping in mind, and a benevolent vision of the possible which can inspire and incite human beings toward virtue, toward life affirmation as opposed to destruction or indifference. (18)

Literature, as an artistic medium, should ultimately enrich. The Bible provides support for this conclusion though Paul’s command: “Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things *are* honest, whatsoever things *are* just, whatsoever things *are* pure, whatsoever things *are* lovely, whatsoever things *are* of good report; if *there be* any virtue, and if *there be* any praise, think on these things” (Phil. 4.8). This passage calls Christians to dwell on that which is good in the Lord’s eyes. Therefore, if a companion constantly pulls the mind down to baseness—whether through purposeful intent or simply through ignorance caused by a distorted worldview; if he at all promotes values which God does not condone—then believers must consider him “bad.” Likewise, if he advances biblical goodness—even if he must mention evil in his endeavors—he proves himself to be “good.” These same principles that Christians use to evaluate human morality may also apply to literature.

Understanding what makes paper or human acquaintances good or bad is one matter; understanding how to apply that knowledge to the decision of whether or not to proceed to friendship is another. Booth contrasts two differing viewpoints of selecting friends. The first entails openly accepting all, focusing on the positive merits, and winnowing out the bad. The second maintains a strict keeping to only that which is proven good, and thus avoids inevitable negative influence (485). (For the purposes of this discussion, the first camp will be termed the

"open viewpoint," and the second, the "closed viewpoint"). However, neither method is without both support and condemning counter-evidence.

Booth's description of the open viewpoint appears attractive at first glance, especially in today's culture which places great store in accepting diversity. Many learned scholars subscribe to this way of thinking, including John Milton. In his anti-censorship speech *Areopagitica*, Milton declares, "Let her [Truth] and Falsehood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the wors, in a free and open encounter. Her confuting is the best and surest suppressing" (45). Milton advocates giving all literature a chance, and argues that truth will in effect act as a censor, triumphing over falsehood. In the context of friendship, this stance assumes that by knowing what is right, a person may remain unaffected by a companion's negative communications. This position assumes of course, that the person has a firm grasp on truth. However, this is often false; one only has to look at the many denominations and beliefs that exist within Christianity to see that no man has a complete understanding of truth. This lack of human understanding, therefore renders the open viewpoint flawed.

Another commonly cited reason to openly associate with poor company—literary or otherwise—is the example of Jesus' spending time with sinners, such as harlots. However, as the author of theological website Revelation.co points out, two characteristics of Jesus' pursuit seem to defeat this argument. Firstly, Jesus spent time with sinners specifically and only as a physical and spiritual "doctor;" and secondly, sin could not influence His divine perfection ("Should Christians"). Jesus is God; man is not. Certain limitations and susceptibilities accompany the human state. Christians, therefore, cannot necessarily imitate Jesus' every action. This biblical argument, although commonly showcased, appears to present virtually the only biblical support for the open viewpoint. On the other hand, over and over the Bible warns Christians to carefully

consider their company. It seems, then, that the open viewpoint, although appealing, does not answer the dilemma of selecting appropriate company.

Perhaps the stronger of the two viewpoints is the closed viewpoint, which stresses censorship of unrighteous content. The underlying belief behind this argument lies in the truth that man is influenced by his surroundings. Unlike the open viewpoint, the closed viewpoint garners much biblical support. The apostle Paul exhorts, “Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners” (1 Cor. 15.33). John Calvin, noted theologian, interprets this passage saying, “we must guard against *evil communications,* as we would against the most deadly poison, *because,* insinuating themselves secretly into our minds, they straightway corrupt our whole life” (43). This warning applies to literature as well as friendships, since both are forms of communication, and both may corrupt. Additional support from the Bible includes the verse, “He that walketh with wise *men* shall be wise: but a companion of fools shall be destroyed” (Prov. 13.20). Because the Bible so strongly warns against ungodly influences, the closed viewpoint presents a more valid framework than does the open viewpoint for establishing a friendship.

However, although the closed viewpoint seems to fit biblical advice, apparent contradictions and unrealistic demands of its strict application make the method not entirely supportable. Consider the following quote by Horatius Bonar, pastor and author in the eighteen hundreds:

> *Shun novels*; they are the literary curse of the age; they are to the soul what ardent spirits are to the body. If you be a parent, keep novels out of the way of your children. But whether you be a parent or not, neither read them yourself, nor set an example of novel-reading to others. Don’t let novels lie on your table, or be seen in your hand, even in a railway carriage. The “light reading for the rail” has

> done deep injury to many a young man and woman. The light literature of the day is working a world of harm; vitiating the taste of the young, enervating their minds, unfitting them for life's plain work, eating out their love of the Bible, teaching them a false morality, and creating in the soul an unreal standard of truth, and beauty, and love. (6)

Bonar's perspective of censoring entire genres of literature falls completely in line with the closed viewpoint of eliminating negative influences. However, it seems odd. His mandates appear almost cultish in their harshness and rigidity. Additionally, if one were to extrapolate the underlying reasoning to guide all areas of moral discernment in life, one would practically have to eradicate all literature but the Bible. Or one would need to leave this world. Quite in opposition to this thought, the apostle John says to the Lord, "I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world" (John 17.15). It seems that according to John, one can remain involved with the things of the world and yet at the same time be removed from its evil. In that light, God must provide a way apart from "book burning" for Christians to be protected of the evil content in literature. Gallagher and Lundin in *Literature through the eyes of Faith* also make an interesting point to contradict the closed viewpoint: "To confine our reading to literature written by professed Christians would significantly limit our understanding, cultivation, and enjoyment of God's creation" (130). In other words, if Christians strictly censor what they read, they miss out on many biblically condoned aspects of the world. These apparent incongruities within the closed viewpoint indicate that the method must not be entirely self-sufficient.

If neither total acceptance of all nor total rejection of evil provides a suitable method for selecting friends, if both contain pieces of truth but individually prove too extreme, then perhaps

Christians may find the solution in a marriage of the two systems. This new viewpoint would stipulate neither immediate rejection nor acceptance of an acquaintance, but instead, the initiation of a trial period. During this period, the Christian would explore, analyze, and test for good character as defined by the Bible. This method finally appears to mesh harmoniously with biblical doctrine: Paul commands the Thessalonians to "[p]rove all things; hold fast that which is good" (1 Thess. 5.21). "Proving" necessitates study of the "thing" in question, which further necessitates time in which to study. If that thing meets the standard set forth in Philippians—demonstrating an overall picture of truth, honesty, justice, purity, loveliness, reputability, virtue and praise—then one may "hold fast" to it, and proceed to intimacy and friendship. If it falls short however, one must let it go and abstain from its company. Booth reaches the same conclusion in *The Company We Keep*, asserting that "we must both open ourselves to 'others' that look initially dangerous or worthless, and yet prepare ourselves to cast them off whenever, after keeping company with them, we conclude that they are potentially harmful" (488). This quasi-closed viewpoint offers a satisfying resolution to the quandary of moral friendship with humans or literature. Not only can the believer apply the method in a practical and reasonable manner, but he can also have the assurance of biblical support behind his actions.

Although selecting literary friends is a complicated matter, the quasi-closed viewpoint pragmatically combines both the open and closed viewpoints, weaving together the threads of truth in each. Christians may employ this biblical model in evaluating both human and literary company: getting to know an "acquaintance," proving the biblical goodness or evil thereof, and then choosing to either advance the relationship to "friendship" or to discard the acquaintance as poor company. By using discretion in this process, a Christian may rest confident in the godliness of his paper friends.

Works Cited

Bonar, Horatius. *Follow the Lamb.* Pensacola, FL.: Mount Zion, *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost).* Accessed 7 Oct. 2014.

Booth, Wayne C. *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction.* U of California P, 1988.

Calvin, Jean. *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians,* vol. 2. Trans. by John Pringle. Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1848. *Princeton Theological Seminary Library.* Internet Archive. Accessed 16 Sept. 2014.

Cotton, Ray. "Morality Apart from God." Biblical Worldview 101 Course Notes, 28 Sept. 2003. Course home page. School of Religion, Liberty University. Accessed 7 Oct. 2014.

Gallagher, Susan V., and Roger Lundin. *Literature through the Eyes of Faith*. HarperCollins, 1989.

Gardner, John. *On Moral Fiction.* Basic Books, 1978.

King James Version Bible. Blue Letter Bible. Sowing Circle. Accessed 16 Sept., 2014.

Mill, John Stuart. *On Liberty.* Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008.

Milton, John. "Areopagitica." *The Works of John Milton.* Columbia UP, 1931. Rpt. in *Areopagitica and Other Political Writings of John Milton*, edited by John Alvis. Liberty Fund, Inc., 1999.

Prior, Karen Swallow. *Booked: Literature in the Soul of Me.* T.S. Poetry P, 2012.

Reinke, Tony. *Lit! A Christian Guide to Reading Books.* Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011.

"Should Christians Be Friends with Non-Christians (Unbelievers)." *Revelation.co,* 1 Aug. 2009.