

Aliens, Wizards, and . . . Frogs? by Pastor Marty

As a young child, my favorite cartoon was Underdog. I have distinct memories of being 6 years old, having a “cape” tied around my neck, and running around the yard as a superhero. I was not immensely discerning when I was younger, for it was not until I was an adult that I realized my favorite TV show was actually a spoof on Superman! (Thankfully, I have gotten a bit better). In the opening, citizens see Underdog flying through the air and mistakenly identify him as a bird, a plane, and even “a frog.” Of course, it is silly to think that a frog could actually fly. Instead, they are very satisfied with less-spectacular feats, such as becoming theatrical producers, vaudeville performers, and representatives for breakfast cereals. However, our collective imaginations teach us that frogs can become royalty, turtles can become ninja warriors, and dogs can become superheroes; therefore, we should not underestimate what we can learn from our amphibian friends.

If frogs can be royalty and turtles can be ninjas, then they can teach us something.

I already mentioned that I was not the most perceptive person on the planet as a child or even as a teenager. However, having become a Christian and spending a good two years at a Bible-believing church, I was slightly less clueless when I attended college. Although it was a Christian undergraduate institution, I was not completely prepared for the extreme range of beliefs and practices by others who claimed to be “Christians.” I learned what it

meant to be a believer from my sister, who modeled and taught me that it meant giving 100% to God, and anything that did not bring someone closer to God was probably drawing the person away from Him. As such, I began to evaluate everything in my life—television, music, books, relationships, recreation, etc.—according to its spiritual temperature. I was not perfect at this, for I grew up with an umbilical cord connected to the television, but I was considered somewhat radical according to other Christians at the school. There were certainly benefits to this practice; I shudder to think of the things I could have incorporated into my life during those years of insecurity and neediness. However, I recognize now that there are many good and beneficial aspects to life that may not be godly in themselves but can assist a person in appreciating who God is and how He works. Chocolate. Enough said.

If it is not drawing you closer to God, then it may be drawing you away—or maybe not.

The Summer before I started at the school, a movie came out in the theaters. I had not seen the movie because people at my church had considered it demonic. I accepted their judgment. However, the issue was not so cut-and-dried among those in an academic context. Every month, the school would show a movie, and it just so happened that this movie was scheduled to play during that freshman year. I remember other students debating among themselves whether Christians could actually go to see that movie or not. I was very

surprised because I did not think it was even an option. However, before I give the name of that movie, I wish to fast-forward to the early twenty-first century. It was during that time that another extremely controversial movie came out in theaters: *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. Now, no matter what a person's predilection or paradigm might be, it is understandable that this movie would raise questions. It involved magic, witchcraft, sorcery, spells, and many other things, almost all of which were presented in a very positive light. Again, the debate was whether it was acceptable fiction for a Christian to watch, or whether it was demonic and brainwashing the minds of children. As it so happened, I entered graduate school for my Master of Divinity the year after it came out, and also being a Christian university, the debate was alive and well. Some students were convinced that the author of the texts was intentionally drawing children into the occult while others were adamantly certain the stories were Christian allegory, comparable to the Chronicles of Narnia. (Only after all the books were published did the author finally admit to being an atheist). However, I noticed something very interesting: the debate over the Harry Potter books and movies was virtually identical in every respect to the debate over a different movie almost 20 years earlier—*E.T.: the Extraterrestrial*.

The names may change, but the core elements of the debate has stayed the same

It is extremely rare today, even among evangelical Christians, to find people who would identify E.T. as demonic. Compared to everything else coming out of Hollywood, it is

about as tame as *Peter Pan* or *the Never-Ending Story*. The main character is a small, vulnerable alien, lost millions of miles from his home, looking for one solitary friend who can help him “phone home” so that he can be rescued. I look at that movie now and find it hard to label anything in it as occult or demonic; nevertheless, as large a portion of the Church was convinced of that then as were convinced of the same for the Harry Potter movies two decades later. This makes me realize something: my own sensitivities have changed.

We should always be aware of when—and why—our sensitivities have changed.

I am no longer so quick to judge as I was back then. However, it also shows me that I have become—at least a little bit—desensitized by the culture. This is where I believe we can learn a lot from our amphibian friends, the frogs. Not surprisingly, frogs do not like to be eaten. Rarely will a frog voluntarily jump into a preheated oven no matter how much the cook begs and pleads. Likewise, frogs almost never sit on barbecue grills if they have a choice in the matter. Most significantly—as many people have often heard—a frog will always jump out after being dropped into a pot of boiling water. It is froggy nature to do so. However, frogs do not mind swimming in a pot of cool water on the stove, and many have sadly succumbed to the gradual increase in temperature caused by a crafty cook. It is this principle that we as Christians must recognize before it is too late.

Nobody willingly jumps into the oven to be eaten—unless they are seriously disturbed.

At least in the United States, the Church resides within a drastically changing culture. The religious freedom and acceptance that was a norm 30 or 40 years ago has now been replaced with paradigms and positions that are increasingly hostile. The water has become much hotter than it was previously. However, there were some frogs recognized what was happening. Thirty years ago, I distinctly remember hearing Christian leaders in our nation describe those things they saw coming down the road, explaining how the mild-and-seemingly-innocent issues of that time would lead to major moral and ethical issues within society, along with persecution for Christians. To be honest, I did not really believe that things could ever become that bad. However, not only has every one of those prophetic words come true, but the situation is again being repeated today: an entire generation of Christians are looking at contemporary issues and only seeing them as mild-and-seemingly-innocent. The prophetic voices that warn of what will come are largely ignored. Unlike the situation 30 years ago, the media itself has taken upon itself to convince large portions of the Church and society that we are alive and well, thriving in a Jacuzzi of enlightenment and understanding, and only the most ignorant and judgmental would describe current situation as a crock pot.

We need to begin recognizing the vegetables in our jacuzzi as signs of trouble.

The Bible promises us the gift of discerning of spirits. Although this is a very specific gift, understood primarily by the early Church as dealing with deliverance, there is also godly discernment that is promised to all

who seek it. The entire book of Proverbs describes godly wisdom that can be learned, nurtured, and developed. It is part of God's character and nature that He does not judge people for being foolish unless they have a choice in the matter. He commanded Joshua to meditate on His Word so that he could know the right way to go and avoid the path of destruction. The very first Psalm describes the success of the person who chooses wisdom instead of folly. In the book of James, we are promised unequivocally to receive wisdom if we ask in faith. However, we need more than just wisdom; we need that discernment that recognizes what is coming down the road. We need to have the critical thinking of the Spirit that can evaluate the future repercussions of actions made today. Similar to what God said to Joshua, part of this requires an active choice. As Christians, we must take the time to consider the possible ramifications of the choices we make. We must open our eyes to the siren-song of the media that can take any position and carefully craft it in a perfect environment to make it look as innocent as Peter Pan or as diabolical as lord Valdemort.

The world can make make Peter Pan look like Him Who Must Not Be Named.

In the book *Perelandra* by C. S. Lewis, the Green Lady—the unfallen Eve of that world—is being tempted by the devil to do the one thing that was forbidden: spend an evening on the fixed land. Similar to the temptation in Genesis, he twisted disobedience to look like the path to enlightenment. He portrayed sin and sinfulness as something noble, selfless, and even misunderstood; he does the same thing

today, framing eternal issues against a painted background of faces and events that alternately tug at the heartstrings or evoke shame and disgust. However, there cannot be any true discernment within the Church unless God's people look beyond the picture to see the actual object of the picture. As Jesus commanded and the apostle Paul reiterated, we must judge not according to appearances but with the righteous judgment.

We must judge not according to appearances but with righteous judgment.

I would love to be able to give perfect and complete instructions in this newsletter that will enable anybody to instantly have this discernment; sadly, it does not really work that way. I can, however, make some suggestions. First, the most important thing is to have a true desire for discernment. As with any aspect of character, growth begins by recognizing how much is needed. Similar to a person attending a twelve-step group, we must not only recognize our sickness but truly and passionately desire wholeness and growth. Therefore, as we recognize our lack of discernment, we cry out to God and pray for discernment; when we do not see a lack of discernment, we repent before God and then pray for discernment. Second, we began to read the Bible for quantity as well as quality. The more we read, the more our heart will begin to identify with the way God works. It is not an immediate solution, but we will begin to notice a difference within a matter of months. Thirdly, we begin to associate with those who have evidenced clear discernment in the areas we lack. In other words, we make conscious choices concerning the voices we

listen to in everyday life. Lastly—but possibly the most important thing—is that we choose to side with biblical guidelines and moral absolutes even when the culture, other Christians, and even our own heart's desire to make things optional. Until we have the discernment that makes us able to recognize the woman at the well, we cannot offer living water.

We must recognize the woman at the well before we can offer her any living water.

However, there is a caveat: decades of appeasing the culture has resulted in a culture that is easily offended. The Church has become so enslaved to peer pressure that the fear of saying “no” has replaced the fear of the Lord. The act of saying “no” to the fabricated mythologies and fairytales of the world will immediately and inherently make all believers look like the villain of the story. The Christian who fights for holiness against the demanding culture will be equated with lord Valdemort's attempt to wipe out the innocent and admirable “mud bloods” of the magical world; the believer who rejects the new paradigm of the future will be viewed like the evil forces that attempted to imprison and dissect the noble, misunderstood, and arguably cute alien that just wanted to “phone home”; and most significantly, the claim to hold to the Bible as a source of absolute ethics and morality will be associated with the Pirates who held to their “pirate code” in an attempt to kill Peter Pan. Regrettably, the Church of this generation will have to face the consequences of the apathy, disbelief, and lack of discernment of the last generation.