

Book Bannings Raise Questions of What's Appropriate for Public School Libraries and Classrooms

The Wired Word for the Week of February 13, 2022

In the News

Book bannings have been in the news in recent months, targeted at titles in public school libraries and classrooms in Oklahoma, Texas and elsewhere. And now, the targeted books are being withdrawn from schools in those states in record numbers at the requests of parents of some students. Some of the parents have been empowered by the tone set by actions of lawmakers in their states.

In Oklahoma, state Sen. Rob Standridge proposed legislation in December that would enable parents to challenge books in public schools. The bill would also allow parents to seek a maximum of \$10,000 award for each day after 30 days during which the school district refuses to remove the book from library shelves. As of this writing, the bill is in the legislative process but has not become law. Whether it will, is unknown at this point.

In Texas in October, state Rep. Matt Krause specified 850 books which he believes could cause students "guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress because of their race or sex or convey that a student, by virtue of their race or sex, is inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously." He asked that school districts across the state report whether any of the titles on his list are in their classrooms or libraries.

Krause did not explain why he was seeking this information, but the state's teachers union said his request "smacks of a witch hunt."

During his 2021 successful bid for governor in Virginia, Glenn Youngkin made parents' opposition to explicit books a central theme in the final stretch of his campaign, leading some members of his party to mark the issue as a winning strategy heading into the 2022 midterm elections.

These actions have led to some school libraries withdrawing certain titles ahead of any possible challenges.

Some critics of these politicians' actions also cite the decision of the school board of McMinn County, Tennessee, last month to remove the graphic novel *Maus* from an eighth grade curriculum due to concerns about profanity and an image of nudity of a cartooned female mouse in the book's depiction of Polish Jews who survived the Holocaust. Those critics have used "banned" to describe the board's action, but that word seems a poor fit in this case. The Holocaust is still discussed in the school's curriculum and the book is still available in the county's public library. Nonetheless, some observers view the school board's move as similar to the actions of the already mentioned politicians.

The McMinn County school board issued a statement saying, "we do not diminish the value of *Maus* as an impactful and meaningful piece of literature, nor do we dispute the importance of teaching our children the historical and moral lessons and realities of the Holocaust."

The board also said that "To the contrary, we have asked our administrators to find other works that accomplish the same educational goals in a more age-appropriate fashion. The atrocities of the Holocaust were shameful beyond description, and we all have an obligation to ensure that younger generations learn of its horrors to ensure that such an event is never repeated."

They concluded: "We simply do not believe that this work is an appropriate text for our students to study."

Regarding the politically based moves, however, some observers have suggested those who want legislation to ban books wish to shape society according to their views. Others assume that the politicians are seeking to score political points with the conservative-voter base.

Commentator William Falk, writing for the left-leaning *The Week*, suggests the censors have "a deep fear that their own ideas and values cannot survive exposure to contrary views."

"Can we afford to be that fragile?" Falk asks. Then, referring to the enshrinement of free speech in the U.S. Constitution, he added, "When we give in to our inner censors, we betray our founding premise."

An article by Stanley Kurtz in the right-leaning *National Review* also speaks against book banning, and argues that rather than banning from school libraries books that present views one doesn't support, one should encourage the libraries to balance them with books presenting other views.

"Preparing the young for mature citizenship means exposing them to contrasting perspectives, Kurtz wrote. "... instead of forcing students into one-sided after-school political advocacy, schools ought to return to the tradition of high-school debate. That's where students learn to take both sides of current controversies, which builds respect for all. Ensuring that our K-12 libraries are stocked with books that offer arguments on both sides of our most controversial public-policy issues is very much in the spirit of high-school debate, and entirely appropriate to K-12," Kurtz said.

A consultant to TWW maintains that for the most part, these news stories deal not with "bannings" per se, but with what might be called "curating": deciding that some things are not appropriate for school children of a given age. That word choice can be debated, but regardless of what word is used, a question behind all of these stories is how to decide *who* is to be empowered to make the decisions: parents, school boards, school librarians, general politicians, or someone else.

The Big Questions

1. Book bannings seldom accomplish the *stated* goal; in fact, the bans often prompt more people, including some from the group supposedly being protected from offending books, to read them. So what, if any, are the values of banning them?
2. What is the danger, if any, for Christians who read broadly, including sources from religious skeptics or unbelievers? What is the danger, if any, for Christians who don't read broadly, including sources from religious skeptics or unbelievers?
3. At what age, if ever, should schools start teaching children to think critically (do objective analysis and evaluation of an issue in order to form a judgment)? How do book bannings help that process? How do they hinder that process?
4. How ought we to view the motives of those who want to legislate book bans? How are those similar to or different from the intentions of parents who simply want to raise emotionally and spiritually healthy children?
5. Who should be empowered to make the decisions regarding what sources are available in schools for children: parents, school boards, school librarians, general politicians, or someone else? Why?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

2 Timothy 3:10-17

¹⁰Now you have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, ¹¹my persecutions and suffering the things that happened to me in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. What persecutions I endured! Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. ¹²Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. ¹³But wicked people and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving others and being deceived. ¹⁴But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, ¹⁵and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

Questions: Do you think that in his early years, Timothy was protected from opposing viewpoints? If so, what would have prepared him for ministry with people who came from pagan backgrounds where there was no belief in Christ? In what ways might he have been taught to think critically?

Jeremiah 36:21-24

Then the king sent Jehudi to get the scroll ... and Jehudi read it to the king and all the officials who stood beside the king. Now the king was sitting in his winter apartment ..., and there was a fire burning in the brazier before him. As Jehudi read three or four columns, the king would cut them off with a penknife and throw them into the fire in the brazier, until the entire scroll was consumed in the fire that was in the brazier. Yet neither the king, nor any of his servants who heard all these words, was alarmed...

Questions: When has a pronouncement against a book, movie or other work kept you from reading or viewing it? Have you ever decided that avoiding such material was a mistake? Why? When has God communicated with you through a book or other source that was outside of your usual reading, hearing or viewing?

Acts 17:16-34

¹⁶While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, "What does this babbling man want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities." (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) ¹⁹So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? ²⁰It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means." ²¹Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

²²Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, ²⁵nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring.' ²⁹Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. ³⁰While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

³²When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, "We will hear you again about this." ³³At that point Paul left them. ³⁴But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

Question: What helps you understand the outlook of people who see the world and the culture differently from you?

Acts 19:11-20

¹¹God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, ¹²so that when the handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were brought to the sick, their diseases left them, and the evil spirits came out of them.

¹³Then some itinerant Jewish exorcists tried to use the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, "I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims." ¹⁴Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. ¹⁵But the evil spirit said to them in reply, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?" ¹⁶Then the man with the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered them all, and so overpowered them that they fled out of the house naked and wounded. ¹⁷When this became known to all residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks, everyone was awestruck; and the name of the Lord Jesus was praised. ¹⁸Also many of those who became believers confessed and disclosed their practices. ¹⁹A number of those who practiced magic collected their books and burned them publicly; when the value of these books was calculated, it was found to come to fifty thousand silver coins. ²⁰So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed.

Questions for personal reflection: What did you have to change in your lifestyle when you first began to more seriously follow Jesus? Are there some things now that you are reluctant to "burn" to walk closer with Jesus?