Targeting Our Fears

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Abstract
"I am inherently suspicious and critical of all ‘worldly’ definitions of gender, childhood, and human-nature in general."

Posting about a Christian response to the social construction of gender difference from In All Things - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

http://inallthings.org/targeting-our-fears/

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Targeting Our Fears

Tanya De Roo

A few weeks ago, Target stopped using gender specific signage in the toy aisles of its stores. Social media immediately lit up with both gleeful accolades and righteous indignation. Well-known Christian bloggers, such as Franklin Graham and Matt Walsh, quickly identified Target’s decision as a threat on Christian values and called for their followers to boycott Target in protest. Evangelical Christians sent thousands of angry tweets and posts to Target’s site, condemning the decision and threatening to ban the stores. Pranksters had fun at the protesters’ expense. It was an online spectacle.

Perhaps you agreed with Graham that our use of the colors pink and blue is how we best celebrate that “God created two different genders,” or, like Walsh, you are offended by any decision in which “the sensitivities of the 0.0001 percent outweigh the concerns of the 99.999 percent.” Perhaps you celebrated the decision to allow children to explore a wider variety of interests, regardless of gender. Regardless, I wonder if what is actually wrong-headed here is that we, as Christians, are looking to a large, secular corporation to shape our children’s identities in the first place.

As a parent of a five-year-old boy and a three-year-old girl, I must admit, initially, I watched the Target drama with bemusement and surprise. My son loves LEGO and StarWars, but he also loves butterflies and cute, furry animals. My daughter loves princesses and sparkles, but also violent battles and math. They find ways to play together. Frankie enters Hendrik’s StarWars world by taking the role of Princess Leia, and Hendrik likes to pretend to be a knight in Frankie’s princess dramas. They both like catching bugs, reading books, building fairy gardens, digging in dirt, playing baseball, and riding bikes together. I enjoy watching all the ways they find to celebrate, explore, and learn about God’s world. As a parent, I have not been annoyed with the gender-segregated aisles nor celebrated the integrated ones. These classifications have felt somewhat irrelevant to our lives.

I will confess this is in part because I rarely shop in large stores for toys (we rely mostly on hand-me-downs, thrift stores, and garage sales in our house). But, in larger part, my indifference is because it has never occurred to me to look to any large corporation to teach my children the values I hope they will someday internalize. I guess, as a Christian, I have always thought of myself as something of a fringe member of society, living “in the world but not of the world,” and, as such, I am inherently suspicious and critical of all “worldly” definitions of gender, childhood, and human-nature in general. Mainstream culture, while sometimes interesting, redemptive, and truth-telling, is just as often distorted, diseased, and limited in its definition of what it is to be human. So, I am left to wonder why we, as Christians, would unquestioningly give the power to define our children’s characters to anyone looking to make a profit, whether they appear to align with our value systems or not? This seems a dangerous practice at best.

Furthermore, we must ask ourselves if, as Christians, we are modeling for our children the fruit of the spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control – when we lash out with vitriol and threats at every perceived cultural challenge to our perspectives? Surely our children will learn more about what it means to be a Christian man or woman from watching us respond with civility and grace than from toys sorted according to gender stereotypes.¹

At our church, before the youngest children are sent to Children in Worship, they come to the front of the church. The congregation sings the following simple song with them: “Don’t be afraid. My love is stronger, my love is stronger than your fear. Don’t be afraid. My love is stronger, and I have promised, promised to
be always near.” This has given me great comfort week after week, as I think about all of the things I am worried about for my children, as I prepare them to live in a world that does, often, seem to be offering them messages that I think are harmful and dangerous to their hearts.

I am reminded, again, that the world belongs to God. All of it. So do my children. I will do everything I can to tell them stories of the great women and men of faith. I will continue to be amused that my daughter seems drawn to the stories of women like Jael and Deborah and loves to hear the story of the tent peg in the king’s head over and over, while my son loves the story of Noah’s ark, because of all the animals that are saved. It seems to me that the Biblical narrative and the stories of the heroes of our faith give my children a wide array of male and female role models. More importantly, these stories teach them, boy or girl, that they are both made in the image of God and that their role in the world is to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with their God. Perhaps when box-stores find a way of marketing these values, I'll start to pay attention.

Footnotes

1. I am not saying that Christians should never speak truth to power or call our cultural institutions into account for injustices when they fail us (unjust treatment of employees, unethical and unstewardly use of resources, and human rights abuses in overseas factories all come to mind as corporate problems that we can and ought to speak strongly about). My point is, when faced with an issue that merely asks us to do nothing except to be tolerant of someone else’s need (however trivial or even wrongheaded it might appear to us), this provides us with an opportunity to be known first as gracious people who speak with love and “pursue peace with everyone” (Hebrews 12:14). I recommend Richard Mouw’s book, Uncommon Decency, (IVP Books, 2010) for more about this topic. ⇩