

CHAPTER SIX



The Beginning

RESPONDING TO POTTERWORLD

As Hagrid had said, what would come, would come . . . and he would have to meet it when it did.¹

Potterworld is not just a series of children's books: it has become a true cultural icon, and one that has successfully translated into dozens of diverse national and sub-national cultures. It connects with something intrinsic to the human spirit, uniting in their admiration and deep enjoyment people from vastly different social and cultural backgrounds. To put it bluntly, literally millions and millions of people, the world over, identify with 'the boy who lived'.

Like it or not, Christians absolutely *must* take this fact seriously when deciding how to respond to Potterworld. One response would be (as we have seen) to condemn the Potter series as ungodly and dangerous. But a clear and unadorned denunciation, even if it were merited – and I hope it is obvious from what I have written so far that I do *not* believe it is merited – would be guaranteed only to alienate or infuriate those people we might hope to influence. Its effect would be to reinforce the impression, which the Church so often unwittingly gives, that God is implacably opposed to anything his creation might actually enjoy. Damn Harry Potter, in

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other words, and we instantly appear to be damning alongside him the very people we are trying so hard to reach. Almost without exception, such 'shoot first and ask questions later' approaches do far more harm than good. At best, we look foolish and prejudiced; at worst, we drive an unnecessary wedge between Potter fans and the Gospel (which we represent) through the insensitivity of our response.

In simple terms, then, our response to Potterworld – as individual Christians and as the Church – needs to be positive and nuanced. That doesn't mean that we have to be uncritical. It means that our criticism must be the concerned and compassionate criticism of a friend, not the spiteful and self-righteous criticism of a foe.

'We Too Are His Offspring'

The apostle Paul famously adopted this approach not simply as a Jew preaching a message to his fellow Jews that included some inherent criticism but equally in the message he preached to predominantly gentile audiences. Those letters of his which have been passed down to us, for example, (almost a third of the New Testament documents) are essentially the concerned and compassionate criticisms of a friend. However, we see this approach most clearly and most shockingly displayed in his recorded address to the citizens of Athens in Acts 17.

It is fairly common knowledge that Paul, having accepted the invitation of some of the Athenian philosophers to explain his point of view in the renowned debating chamber of Mars Hill, unpacked his Gospel message very sensitively. Not only did he omit all mention of Jesus in his speech (referring to nothing more specific than 'a man whom he [God] has appointed') but he based it on the kind of religious knowledge and expression he felt his audience would relate to. The essence of his speech was not that humanity is sinful and in

need of a redeemer – something that would pass muster with us but would have made little sense to an Athenian crowd – but simply that God didn't need to live in man-made temples and wasn't dependent on human gifts for food but was the source of all human life. '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,' he told them.² Most notably, of course, he made use of an altar inscription he had seen in the city, 'To an unknown god,'³ to support his argument (explaining that what was *unknown* to them was *well known* to him), and quoted approvingly from the work of two renowned pagan poets, the legendary Cretan poet Epimenides and Aratus of Cilicia.

What is less well known or understood is precisely how close to the wind Paul sailed. Athens was famous throughout the ancient world not just for the Parthenon, a massive temple dedicated to the goddess Athena, but also for its half-finished but still very impressive temple to Zeus, who was (in some cases quite literally) the father of the Greek pantheon. In *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, Homer calls him the 'father of gods and men'.⁴ If the average Athenian citizen heard someone simply talking about 'God', as Paul did throughout his talk, they would most naturally assume that he was talking about Father Zeus. Paul, it has to be said, did little to disabuse them of this notion. In fact in many ways he encouraged it. The two snippets from poems that he quoted both relate not to the God of the Bible or some generic deity but very specifically to Zeus. Epimenides (or someone writing in his name) took issue with those who subscribed to the ancient Greek equivalent of the 'God is dead' idea, and who had built a symbolic tomb for Zeus. Addressing Father Zeus directly, he wrote:

*You are not dead; you live and abide for ever
For in you we live and move and have our being.*⁵

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The quotation from Aratus, similarly, is from the opening invocation to Zeus in his poem:

*In every way we have all to do with Zeus, for we are truly his offspring.*⁶

Far from being neutral or ambiguous poems, in other words, Paul's choice of quotations were clearly linked to Zeus. In using them, he risked people thinking that he was simply identifying his Jewish God, the God of the Bible, with the Greek god Zeus, as if there were no difference.

In fact Paul's strategy was far more canny and critical than this. He established a link in people's minds between God and Zeus in order to influence how they perceived him. In the ancient world, gods were generally thought to live in their temples and enjoy the offerings of food that their devotees brought them. This was a very old view, and although most Greeks were fully aware that their gods equally lived on Mount Olympus and in the heavenly realms, they nevertheless could not shake the view that their temples literally *housed* their gods. Even Jews subscribed to this view – though there is no counterpart in Judaism for the idea that food offerings literally nourished God, Jews both in Jerusalem and throughout the Roman world rightly felt that God's 'glory' dwelt in a very special way in the Jerusalem Temple. Paul (who would have added to this that it dwelt most fully in the 'temple' of Jesus, and of his Church) deliberately exploited the Greek view that Zeus was greater than the temples dedicated to him.

God, he argued – and by this he knew that his hearers would have thought of Zeus – is not so feeble or powerless that he *really* lives in shrines and temples made by human beings and depends on them for food. Nor is he adequately represented by the splendour and symbolism of golden statues or stone cathedrals built in his image or honour. Such 'human ignorance', Paul argued, is beneath us: it belongs to the

naïveté of a bygone age. God – and once again his audience would have had Zeus in mind – will sweep it away in his righteous judgement ‘by a man whom he has appointed’. The idea of humans being appointed judges by the gods was not new in Greek mythology, so Paul’s audience would have had little trouble following, and agreeing with, his speech up to this point. In fact, we are told, it is only when he mentions the resurrection of the dead that he begins to lose his audience. Some, Acts tells us, ‘scoffed’ – only four years later, Paul admitted to the Christians in Corinth (who were having difficulties believing in the resurrection of the dead themselves) that Jesus’ death and resurrection generally seemed like ‘foolishness to gentiles’.⁷ But for others his risky strategy paid off: they wanted to know more. By being critically positive about Zeus, and pagan poetry written consciously in praise of Zeus, Paul enabled gentiles with no real understanding of any of the basic tenets of Judaism or Christianity to come to grips with Christian faith and with its God. Through that, we are told, they ‘became believers’.

If Paul could treat literature about Zeus, the ‘father of gods and men’, in this critically positive way, we – surely – can treat literature about Harry Potter, the ‘boy who lived’, in this same critically positive way. The common ground and shared values between Christianity and Potterworld are considerably greater than those between Christianity and the worship of Zeus. If we can use that common ground, encouraging both children and adults alike to recognize and approve the genuine values and virtues of Potterworld – the positive things I have talked about at some length in this book – then there is a real hope and chance that we will, in time, enable them to see the challenge of the Christian faith, helping them to ‘become believers’ themselves.

The writer of Hebrews called the Jerusalem Temple sanctuary ‘a mere copy of the true one’ in heaven.⁸ Appropriating this language, we could see the real virtues of Potterworld as

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'mere copies' of the 'true ones' to be found at the heart of the Christian faith, in Jesus himself. Joanne Rowling may perhaps be none too pleased by this analogy – I have no idea whether she would consider herself a Christian or not – but given the massive success and popularity of the Harry Potter books all over the world, and the sheer quality of the 'mere copies' (with which literally tens of millions of people readily identify), it would be utter foolishness for us *not* to use the appropriate elements of Potterworld as a potential resource in our ongoing efforts to help people understand the Christian faith. There is, in my view, absolutely nothing wrong – and a good deal right – with using a 'mere copy' if it can enhance people's ability to understand the real thing . . . and keep them amused and entertained in the process. Far from amounting to a denial of the Gospel, the Potter series – through its morality, implicit theology and metaphysics – opens a way to encourage children and adults alike to move beyond the literary creation of Potterworld to ask questions about truth and reality in a way that would have been taboo a generation ago. If this is not opening the door to the Gospel, I don't know what is.