

The Discerning Mama Bear

The refined art of “chew and spit”

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Say the word *discernment*, and everybody thinks of something different. My friend’s church class instructor had an interesting take on it. Apparently when it came to discernment among believers, he claimed that the Spirit would never reveal anything “negative” about another believer. If you “discerned” something negative, then it wasn’t from the Holy Spirit. Ummm . . . excuse me? The Lord is never going to let me discern something negative about another believer? Where is *that* verse in the Bible? (I bet Nathan the prophet would beg to differ.)¹

I’ve also known respected Christian leaders who implicitly define discernment in the exact opposite way. Instead of *never* identifying negative things they see going on around them, they *only* point out the bad stuff. They may not come right out and say, “Discernment means pointing out everything you disagree with.” However, when they claim to be exercising biblical discernment, it’s often one big finger-pointing rant from beginning to end. They might as well title it “Everything That’s Wrong with _____.” Take your pick—a movie, a book, another Christian’s theology.

Still others equate discernment with a feeling, like intuition. This is what the Bible refers to as “discerning of spirits” (see 1 Corinthians 12:10;

1 John 4:1). While that is part of discernment, it is not the whole part, or even a major part of what we are talking about here. We are talking about using discernment when it comes to ideas and worldviews, the discerning of truth from nontruth. This requires a commitment to understanding the Bible's teachings, and not just single verses.

The Party Nobody Wants to Attend

A friend of mine's young son said to her, "You always tell me no! You are the party of no! Nobody wants to go to *that* party, Mom." I suspect it was one of those moments where my friend felt torn between disciplining him for disrespect or laughing because what he said was funny. As a former teacher, I've felt this same conflict. But disrespectful or not, her son had a point. If we Christians are constantly focusing on our areas of disagreement, then we've basically become the food critics of Christianity. We sit back, create nothing, but tear down anyone else brave enough to try. What a cushy job! Who wouldn't want that gig?

We never want Christianity to be known as "the party of no." Rather, we should be known for our love, wisdom, and devotion to Christ and each other. True, part of keeping ourselves unpolluted by the world means rejecting certain parts of culture, but that should never be our main message to the people around us.²

So How Are We Defining Discernment?

Biblical discernment means identifying *both* the good and the bad. I compare biblical discernment to having a food allergy. For example, I can't eat peas. (Or rather, I *can*, but it is an unpleasant experience for everyone afterward.) If someone were to serve me a delicious plate of fried rice with vegetables, the first thing I would do is pick out the peas. I don't accept all the food, and I don't reject all of it. You could call this "culinary discernment." As Mama Bears, our job is to help separate the good from the bad, accept the good, and reject the bad.

Kids are natural culinary discerners. Raise your hand if you have a picky eater. (I'm assuming most of you are raising your hands.) Kids

instinctively pick through their food as soon as you hand them their meal. Very rarely will they chow down without a thorough inspection. They want to make absolutely sure that you aren't pulling one of your mom-neaking-an-unfamiliar-vegetable-into-the-meal tricks. If there are elements they don't like, they will immediately pick them out. (This is usually accompanied by grunts of frustration and loud sighing to dissuade you from including these ingredients in future meals.)

As Mama Bears, our job is to help separate the good from the bad, accept the good, and reject the bad.

Needless to say, we don't need to train our children to be picky when it comes to what they feed their bodies—they do this on their own. But we *do* have to train them to be discerning about what they feed their minds. I am reminded of the old Sunday school song that says, "Oh be careful, little eyes, what you see..." Everything our children watch and hear is either nourishing or harming their spiritual body.

Most parents will probably say, "I'm *very* careful what my children watch or listen to." That is good! Children progress through both physical *and* moral developmental stages. New parents baby-proof their homes because they know that a child beneath a certain age has no concept of right and wrong. Similarly, parents often childproof the media their kids are allowed to watch. If that's true in your case, I applaud you for this! However, we must realize that this is essentially like cutting up our kids' food for them. While parental supervision is appropriate for young children, at some point your kids will need to learn the skills to make wise decisions on their own, without you hovering over them. *We want to keep our kids safe, but part of keeping them safe is teaching them to discern for themselves.* When it comes to media, we cannot do this by simply labeling things as "safe/dangerous" or "Christian/non-Christian."

I have seen this safe/dangerous tactic used by many parents. The problem with so many aspects of culture is that they cannot be picked apart like food. For example, while listening to a song, we cannot pick which

parts we want to hear and which parts we don't. We live in a world where the good is mixed in with the bad. There is very little that is all safe or all dangerous. Most everything requires discernment.

The Chew-and-Spit Method of Discernment

I have a shocking little statement for you: There are no Christians so theologically sound that they're never wrong, and there are no atheists so bad that they're never right. It doesn't happen. There is only one perfect man—Jesus, and one perfect book—the Bible. Most everything else will be a mixture of truth and error.³

The danger of dividing up the world into simplistic “safe” and “dangerous” or even “Christian” and “non-Christian” categories is that our kids will eventually (and perhaps accidentally) swallow a lie from something they thought was safe or Christian, or reject a truth from something they thought was dangerous or non-Christian. It is here that the picky-eater method for discernment is no longer viable. We need a new model. And as gross as it sounds, it's called the chew-and-spit method.

I am a proud Texan, and beef is a part of our cultural heritage. I *love* a good steak! Most steak eaters know that there are some pieces that make you keep chewing...and chewing... These are known as *gristle*. From a young age, we were trained to discreetly spit the gristle into a napkin without drawing attention to ourselves, then continue on with our meal. Chew and spit. We have to do it with certain types of food, and we have to do it with culture.

I'll use rated R movies as an example. The R-rated movies of the 1980s and 1990s are today's PG-13. Nowadays it is very difficult for me to sit through a movie with an R rating because of the amount of swearing and sexual content. That's why I generally avoid them, but I don't make it a hard rule to do so.⁴

I do not dismiss all rated R movies because there are some that have content that Christians can find to be of value. They may not outline the steps of salvation or show an atheist accepting Christ, but they do depict a kind of raw reality that is valuable to acknowledge and which can't be

accurately depicted without disturbing content. For example, there was one movie produced in the late 1990s that portrayed the journey of a guy and a girl descending into the world of drugs. The movie showed the various physical and psychological stages that accompany addiction, and the (cough) lengths people will go to get their next fix. It was a brilliant movie, spectacularly produced, and images from it *still* haunt me to this day. What did I do after I finished watching it? I got on my knees and praised God for what He had protected me from. The movie reminded me how, with a few wrong decisions, I could have easily been one of those teenagers who got caught up with the wrong crowd and descended into drug culture.

The movie was brilliant in the way it showed the slow decay that occurs as a normal teenager becomes a junkie. And in *no way* did the film glorify the process. I can wager that not a single viewer left that movie thinking, *Oooh, that looks like fun! I want to try drugs!* The next time any of them went to a party where drugs were offered, I bet they thought twice. The movie had graphically exposed the deception of drugs, and in that sense, I think it was God-honoring. Did every part honor God? No. But the film was definitely worth a chew-and-spit experience.

My point is that *a mature, informed, discerning worldview does not need to fear the false messages that this world churns out if it has already been trained to identify which aspects to reject.* I'm not saying that every R-rated movie is as redeeming as this one (and especially not the ones being produced nowadays). But on the occasion such a movie comes along that appears to have redeeming value, I am well practiced in chewing and spitting—mentally swallowing what is spiritually useful, and spitting out the rest.

Not only do I use this method when I am interacting with culture, but also when I am listening to a sermon. There are many excellent theologians out there, but no one is 100% biblical and balanced all the time. We cannot listen to pastors without the occasional chew and spit. Not even Paul was immune from scrutiny. When he showed up to teach the Bereans,

they were all, “Who is this fool? Fact check everything he says!” And they were *praised* for doing so! (Acts 17:11...with creative liberties taken.)

The Consequences of Not Teaching Our Kids to Chew and Spit

As I mentioned above, dividing the world into *safe/good/Christian* or *dangerous/bad/non-Christian* is like cutting your kids’ food for them. This TV show is good. That one is bad. You can listen to this musician, but not that one. While this method is appropriate for children still in the black-and-white stage of thinking, it becomes counterproductive as they mature. Why? Because it gives them the mistaken impression that as long as they *categorize* something correctly, they can turn their brains off and operate on autopilot. However, there is no such thing as autopilot in the Christian life. I’ve heard F-bombs from a pastor during a sermon, and I was surprised at some of the excellent points Karl Marx made in *The Communist Manifesto*. Most everything is a mix of good and bad. (Or as Rebekah [one of the contributors to this book] always says, we’re all a mixture of marble and mud.)

As tiring as it is to do so, we must exercise discernment in response to *everything* we hear and see, and we are to train our kids to do the same. Otherwise, what happens when your freshman goes off to college and assumes that professors, pastors, or Christians are *safe* when they’re not? I have seen strong Christians go down weird and dangerous theological trails all because they thought a pastor or Christian leader’s doctrine was trustworthy. Most anyone can spot a wolf among sheep. It’s much harder to spot the wolf in sheep’s clothing, and yet *that* is our command (Matthew 7:15).

Second, what happens when your children are under the impression that certain artists, speakers, or books are dangerous when they aren’t? I can almost guarantee that at some point, they will find something redeemable, good, or true within what they were told was in the bad category. As your children get older and explore the world for themselves, they will discover that some of the “forbidden fruit” you’ve urged them to avoid are not dens of iniquity full of sex and Satan worship. At this point, they

feel lied to. And lied to by whom? By you, of course! Or their pastor, or church, maybe by Christianity in general. And once they feel lied to about one thing, they will start wondering about what else has been a lie. At that point, you will have lost all credibility and for what? For children who were “safer” for a few more years, only to make a beeline for all the things you denied them in their youth? Except now, when it comes time for them to interact more with the world, it’ll be like they are walking into a junkyard with virtually no immune system.

The most potent lies are wrapped in partial truths.

We need to train kids the refined art of chew and spit. We must build up their spiritual immune systems. We must teach them how to interact with contemporary culture, swallow what is good, and spit out what is bad. But we cannot teach them how to do this if we do not know how to ourselves! So what can we do?

ROAR Like a Mother!

Discernment is a process, and it doesn’t stop at *identifying* the good and bad elements within culture. We must know *why* certain things are considered good or bad. That’s why we here at Mama Bear Apologetics have created this handy-dandy guide for you! We won’t guarantee that by utilizing these steps your children will develop perfect discernment and never go wrong. However, by regularly practicing these steps, they will learn the necessary tools to protect their own minds and hearts from popular lies wrapped in partial truths. Because that’s the most effective kind of lie, is it not?

Truth is powerful, and the most potent lies are wrapped in partial truths. If a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down, then partial truths help the lies go down. The all safe/dangerous method teaches kids that lies are easy to spot. The chew-and-spit method teaches them that most lies are wrapped in attractive packages.

Being a Mama Bear isn’t limited to protecting your kids from the dangers in this world, although that is part of it. The best Mama Bears *teach*

their kids how to spot danger on their own and avoid it! We here at Mama Bear Apologetics use the ROAR method. ROAR is an acronym for:

Recognize the message

Offer discernment (affirm the good and reject the bad)

Argue for a healthier approach

Reinforce through discussion, discipleship, and prayer

Each chapter in this book will take you through these four steps. We are in a culture war, and unfortunately, a lot of people are talking past each other. Why? Because neither side will recognize the good that their opponent is offering! The ROAR method is intended to identify a message and analyze its ideas with grace and truth. Doing this requires identifying the good intentions, separating them from the bad ideas, synthesizing a healthier approach, and strategically praying through the battle of ideas.

Step 1: Recognize the Message

All media—movies, books, music, and art—have a message. The question is this: Can we identify the message? Going back to our chew-and-spit analogy, the only way for me to know whether I should spit something out is by correctly identifying the food to begin with. Is it squishy when it's supposed to be firm? Is it crunchy when it's supposed to be smooth? If I bit into a piece of broccoli and it had the texture of pudding, I would spit that nastiness out immediately! I know what broccoli is supposed to feel like in my mouth, and it ain't like pudding.

When it comes to media, here are some habits you will find helpful:

1. Identify the messages that are being presented. They all have one or more. (Except maybe that song about there being millions of peaches... I think those dudes were just high.)
2. Along with your kids, identify which values the creators are elevating. (Freedom? Autonomy? Sex? Drugs? Pride?) Which values

are they demeaning? (Humility? Responsibility? Traditional gender roles?)

3. Try to piece together the worldview behind the message. What do you think the artist's definition of good and bad is? What about moral and immoral? What is the good life—the life that reflects success (according to their art or writing)? Is it money? Lots of romantic relationships? Freedom from rules?
4. If you are watching a movie, identify which characters and qualities are presented in an attractive way. Pay attention to the traits that are exhibited by the villains. The protagonist and antagonist are often archetypes, or representations of ideas.

Accurately identifying the message is the first step toward exercising discernment. There are many ways you can cultivate this skill with your kids. When you go see a film, choose movie theaters that are further away than you would normally go. On the long drive home, discuss the movie. Ask your children to identify the overall message. Can they do it? Can you?

What about the music your kids listen to? What are their favorite songs? Print out the lyrics, get together for family night, go through the songs line by line. Identify the message underlying each one. What is being communicated as truth? What is being glorified? What is being shamed?

Part of the biblical process of sanctification—or spiritual growth—is *training* our appetites to crave what is good and be repulsed by what is not. What is the song, movie, art piece, or story prompting the consumer to crave? Identify it. Discuss it together. Is it something the Bible wants us to crave? I am sure that you will get your share of eye rolls, but that's part of being a parent, right? (I personally believe eye rolls are a God-given sign that you're doing something right.)

Step 2: Offer Discernment

There is a big difference between *offering* discernment and being a finger pointer. Nobody wants to have a conversation with someone lecturing

from their soapbox, so keep this step conversational. Young kids tend to be black-and-white thinkers, so it is important for us to model discernment in a way that doesn't encourage them to be "terrifying truth tellers." Do not be mistaken: A person can be absolutely in the right yet be totally obnoxious about it. Our goal is for God's truth to be the aroma of Christ, not the stench of self-righteousness.

There are three skills necessary for practicing discernment: (1) seeing things accurately, (2) correctly identifying the good, and (3) correctly identifying the bad. If we don't see things accurately, we may end up condemning a strawman version (or a false representation) of an idea. A strawman argument is a type of logical fallacy—it happens when a person presents an oversimplified and distorted version of an idea and then offers a rebuttal to it. It got its name because doing this is like getting into a fight with a lifeless scarecrow. You may "win the fight," but only because you set the situation up in such a way that it was hardly a fair match.

Here are two examples of strawman statements: (1) "Evolutionists think that our great-great-grandfather was a monkey," and (2) "Pro-life advocates think women should go back to being barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen." An evolutionist would never agree with the first statement, and a pro-lifer would never agree with the second. In both cases, a strawman version of a specific viewpoint has been set up. We must avoid doing this if we want to earn the right to speak into culture. Our goal in discernment is to offer up an accurate representation of what our opponents believe—to the point they would agree with what we say about them. Think of it as the golden rule of apologetics: Treat other people's ideas the way you would like yours to be treated.

The second necessity in discernment is to accurately identify the good. This could be in the form of good ideas, good values, or good motives. There are a lot of bad things people do with good motives. Having correct motives doesn't make their actions right, nor does it make their statements true. Pointing out that someone's cherished beliefs are incorrect is akin to doing worldview surgery. How does a surgeon approach a patient?

He doesn't run quickly into the operating room from out of nowhere, waving a scalpel and slicing away. No. The doctor builds a relationship with the person. Together they talk about the procedure to be performed and why it will be helpful. Over time, trust is established.

Similarly, we establish trust with people by acknowledging their good intentions. Few people think that they are on the wrong side of history. Everyone sees themselves as crusading for the greater good. We must try to see their idea from *their* perspective. What are they valuing? What are they trying to accomplish? What is their ultimate goal? A person who believes in communism is often motivated by the corruption she or he sees in large corporations. He or she may know people who work three jobs yet can't seem to pay the bills. This person may ache for the plight of the poor and genuinely want to lift them up to a higher station in life. All of these motivations are things that we can affirm! *We should* stand against corruption. *We should* want to help the poor.

It should go without saying that there are *massive* issues with communism that we should stand against. However, before we point all of them out, let's stand on the same side as our misguided comrade and affirm all the good that we can. It is easier to fight with people when you are standing opposite of them. It is much harder to take a swing when you are standing on the same side. When we affirm the good intentions of the other person, we build bridges of trust. These bridges tell the person, "I see you. I hear you. I understand you." That trust *must* be built before we can attempt to start "remodeling" unhealthy beliefs.

That is why the step of affirming the good must come first. People may think that their belief is their identity, but it is not. Scripture tells us in Colossians 2:8, "See to it that no one takes you *captive* through hollow and deceptive philosophy." *We are not dealing with enemies. We are dealing with captives.* Think of it like a hostage situation. All good cops know that if a kidnapper is holding a hostage, you do not take a shot unless you can separate the hostage enough to ensure that your bullet hits the abductor and not the abductee. In the battle of ideas, we cannot drop a truth bomb

and let the chips fall where they may. We must maintain love for the person while we demolish the idea.

The final requirement for discernment is to identify the bad. People often fall into one of two categories—they either dread this step (or avoid it all together), or this is their favorite step and they rush through all the other steps so they can start pointing out everything that’s wrong in the world. There is a time and a place to speak up against lies that are being smuggled in through virtuous motives. When people don’t speak up, lies snowball. A friend of mine used to tell his kids, “What you tolerate today, you accept tomorrow. What you accept today, you embrace tomorrow.” I would add a third statement to that: “What you embrace today, you promote tomorrow.” We have seen this progression within the realm of sexual ethics, have we not?

Step 3: Argue for a Healthier Approach

I can already hear the moms’ nostrils flaring with this one. “What? No way am I teaching my kid to argue. I’m always trying to get them to *stop* arguing!” Before we can appreciate this step, we need to first rid ourselves of the colloquial definition of *argue*. The Oxford English Dictionary defines *argue* as to “give reasons or cite evidence in support of an idea, action, or theory, typically with the aim of persuading others to share one’s view.” That is what we at Mama Bear Apologetics mean by an argument.

When we argue for a healthier worldview, we are providing *reasons* for why we affirm that which we say is good and reject that which we say is evil. We need reasons for calling one idea *truth* and another idea a *lie*. We cannot tear someone’s worldview apart and just leave it there. We need to propose an alternative worldview, one that retains all the good elements that we’ve affirmed while replacing the lies with biblical wisdom.

Biblical wisdom is not ignorant of the world. It doesn’t think that this life is always full of rainbows and puppies. Rather, it takes human nature into account. It anticipates evil, selfishness, and suffering. It isn’t under the impression that we will ever achieve utopia here in this world. A biblical

worldview sees the world for the broken mess that it is, but at the same time understands the hope that Christ provides.

Having a biblical worldview doesn't mean that we just attach Bible verses to a statement and call it a day. We should realize by now that anyone can take a verse out of context to justify their own agenda. Not only must we know Scripture, but we need to *know God, and know the heart of God*. The heart of God will never conflict with the Word of God, but the words of God can be twisted, as happened in the garden of Eden.

Furthermore, while we as Christians believe that a healthy worldview *is* a biblical worldview, we don't have to limit ourselves to verses when it comes to supporting our stance. Scripture is a great starting point when talking with other Christians, but most non-Christians don't care what the Bible says. We need to find common ground that gives them a reason to want to talk with us.

It's amazing how many truths in Scripture were ignored until modern science finally showed them to be true. A biblical worldview helps us flourish with insights into human nature, principles of discernment, guidelines for society, and truths about ultimately reality. It allows us to see things as they really are. Common sense and fair-minded science reinforce a good biblical worldview. For this reason, we will not only share verses that reflect the truth and lies that we discuss in this book, but we will also seek to give practical, real-world, common-sense evidence that supports what the Word of God teaches. Your children need to know that God's wisdom isn't just valid in church. It can be taken into the arenas of science, sociology, and psychology and shown to be true there as well.

Step 4: Reinforce Through Discussion, Discipleship, and Prayer

It is not enough to discern between good and evil, or even to provide the reasons for the conclusions we've reached as a result of our discernment. If we stop there, it's like we have trained for a test and then slept in on exam day. The way we live our lives is evidence that a biblical

worldview is coherent, reasonable, rational, and good. It isn't enough for our kids to hear us *talk* about the truth; they must understand how we are to *live* the truth.

At the end of each chapter, we will provide some helpful conversation starters for you and your kids. We will also recommend some activities that will help reinforce the truths that we are upholding and the lies that we are rejecting. And finally, we cannot be ignorant of the fact that our war is not a battle between people. It's not even a battle between ideas! Our war is predominantly a *spiritual* battle, and we need to prepare ourselves accordingly. Thus, in Part 2 of this book, we have also included a PAWS for Prayer section at the end of each chapter, written by Julie Loos, with prayers specifically tailored to address each of the lies we discuss. We can talk all day long, but the real battle takes place on our knees. May we never forget that!

Discussion Questions

1. **Icebreaker:** What is the grossest thing you've ever accidentally eaten?
2. **Main theme:** *Discernment means both affirming the good and rejecting the bad.* What are some examples of things in pop culture that polarize people? Have you ever completely disagreed with someone about something you thought was "bad"? Pick something to discuss (such as a TV show, a movie, a book, political view, or a way of thinking), and talk about the good and the bad. What good can be swallowed? What needs to be spit out?
3. **Self-evaluation:** Do you have a tendency to label things as either safe or dangerous for your children? For what ages and personality types do you think this method is appropriate? For what ages or personality types might this method be inappropriate? Why?
4. **Brainstorm:** What are some ways that you can take your children's media or interests and teach them to chew and spit?

5. **Release the bear:** Pick one song or movie that your child likes and listen to or watch it together. Identify the good aspects that align with God's truth. Identify the aspects that don't. Remind your children how important it is that they practice this kind of discernment with all books, movies, music, and ideas.