

Pop Culture Faith: Teaching the Gospel through TV and Film

Pop culture influences the clothes we wear, the music we listen to, the attitudes we hold, and even the language we use. Too often, the church pits itself against these influences, instead of leveraging them. This workshop explores how adult education programs can harness the shared cultural experience of TV and film to nurture deeper faith.

Suggested Shows

TV SERIES

- The Good Place (Netflix, DVD) – a comedy about the afterlife
- Ted Lasso (Apple TV) – a comedy about the power of kindness
- Good Omens (Prime) – a comedy about the end of the world
- The Chosen (website, Prime) – a drama about the life of Jesus
- Sopranos (HBO, Hulu) – a drama exploring morality and the cost of evil

FILM

- Stars Wars (original trilogy) – the cosmic struggle between good and evil
- Harry Potter – a chosen one rises up to defeat evil and restore good
- Chronicles of Narnia – a broken world is redeemed and restored
- A Man Called Otto – a community loves a lonely widower back to life
- Lars and the Real Girl – a community accepts a vulnerable young man, and through their kindness, restore him to real relationship

Further Readings

BOOKS

- *Better Living through TV: Contemporary TV and Moral Identity Formation*, Stephen A. Benko (2024)
- *Movies and Midrash*, Wendy I. Zierler (2017)
- *The Good Place and Philosophy*, Eds. Benko and Pavelich (2019)
- *Ted Lasso and Philosophy*, Eds. Marybeth and David Baggett (2024)
- *The Gospel according to Star Wars*, John C. McDowell (2007)
- *The Gospel According to Harry Potter*, Connie Neal (2008)

POP CULTURE AND PHILOSOPHY SERIES

Wiley-Blackwell: The Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture Series
Fortress Press: Theology, Religion, and Pop Culture Series
Open Court: Popular Culture and Philosophy Series

It's Your Turn!

Use this checklist to plan a film or TV-based study:

Leadership Buy-in

- Identify the target audience and float the concept to gauge interest
- Recruit a host / facilitator for the group
- Gain buy-in of committee or other church leadership

Narrowing the focus

- Identify a film or TV series that will engage your target audience
 - What shows are they already watching?
 - What stage of life is the group in?
 - What major questions (or transitions) are they facing?
- Determine viewing method (church, home, theater, etc.). Consider whether the group members have (or need) access to streaming services
- Survey the film or series to get a feel for the storyline

Designing the study

- Divide the content into segments based on the number of lessons planned. For a one-time event, a whole film might be the segment. For an eight-week series, each lesson might be one episode of a TV show.
- Watch each segment closely. Take notes with these questions in mind:
 - What is the major theme and takeaway from the segment?
 - What ethical issues do the characters wrestle with?
 - What Bible passage does this scene/story bring to mind?
 - What theological questions are raised?
 - How would a person of faith react in this situation? Did the main character react this way? If not, what could they do differently?
 - Where do you see God at work in this story? (if you don't – why?)
- Research the connections and issue raised by the above exercise. Develop 3-4 points for discussion by the group (per segment).

Launching the study

- Set up the space (and/or technology) in advance
- Invite participants to bring their Bibles or other resources
- Facilitator should review their research and bring it with them. These discussions can be wide-ranging as the group moves from the TV show or film and into the theological implications.
- Have fun!