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What Is a Worldview?

This book is an attempt to spell out the content of a biblical worldview and its significance for our lives as we seek to be obedient to the Scriptures. The ideas that make up this worldview are not original with me. They come from a long tradition of Christian reflection on the Scriptures and our overall perspective on the world, a tradition rooted in the Scriptures themselves. It has had as some of its most prominent representatives the Church Fathers Irenaeus and Augustine, and the Reformers Tyndale and Calvin.

This scripturally informed worldview is sometimes called "reformational," after the Protestant Reformation, which discovered afresh the biblical teaching concerning the depth and scope of sin and redemption. The desire to live by Scripture alone, rather than Scripture alongside of tradition, is a hallmark of the Reformers. We follow their path in this emphasis as well as in wanting an ongoing reformation, in wanting to be re-formed by the Scriptures continuously (see Acts 17:11, Rom. 12:2) rather than living by unexamined traditions.

Reformational reflection on worldview has taken distinctive shape as it has moved into the twentieth century, something that can be seen specifically in the work of such Dutch leaders as Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, Herman Dooyeweerd, and D. H. T.

Vollenhoven. Their contributions to a more profound and articulate understanding of the biblical worldview have come through theology, philosophy, and other academic disciplines, and especially through cultural and social action arising from a deep desire to be obedient to the Scriptures in all areas of life and service.

The term *worldview* came into the English language as a translation of the German *Weltanschauung*. It has the advantage of being clearly distinct from "philosophy" (at least in German usage) and of being less cumbersome than the phrase "world-and-life view," which was favored by the Dutch neo-Calvinists (probably following a usage made popular by the German philosopher Dilthey). An acceptable synonym is "life perspective" or "confessional vision." We may also speak more vaguely about the whole of a person's "principles" or "ideals." A Marxist would call it an "ideology"; the most prevalent label in the secular social sciences today is probably "system of values." These terms are less than acceptable because the terms themselves have connotations of determinism and relativism that betray an unacceptable worldview.

For our purposes, *worldview* will be defined as "the comprehensive framework of one's basic beliefs about things." Let us take a closer look at the elements of this definition.

First of all, "things" is a deliberately vague term that refers to anything about which it is possible to have a belief. I am taking it in the most general sense imaginable, as encompassing the world, human life in general, the meaning of suffering, the value of education, social morality, and the importance of the family. Even God can in this sense be said to be included among the "things" about which we have basic beliefs.

Second, a worldview is a matter of one's *beliefs*. Beliefs are different from feelings or opinions because they make a "cognitive claim" — that is, a claim to some kind of knowledge. I may say, for example, that I "believe" that education is the road to human happiness. That means that I am asserting something about the way things are,

what the case is. I am willing to defend that belief with arguments. Feelings do not lay claim to knowledge, nor can they be argued.

Beliefs are not opinions or hypotheses either. To be sure, we sometimes use the word *belief* in that sort of weakened sense ("It is my belief that Johnny will come home late again tonight"), but I am here using the word *belief* in the sense of "credo," a *committed* belief, something that I am willing not only to argue, but also to defend or promote with the outlay of money or the endurance of hardship. For example, it may be my belief that freedom of speech is an inalienable right in human society, or that no one should impose his or her religion on someone else. To hold a belief may call for sacrifice on my part, or the endurance of scorn or abuse if it is an unpopular or unorthodox belief — say, that prisons should punish as well as rehabilitate, or that free enterprise is the scourge of our society. All such beliefs are examples of what goes into a worldview. It has to do with one's *convictions.*

Third, it is important to note that worldviews have to do with *basic* beliefs about things. They have to do with the ultimate questions we are confronted with; they involve matters of general principle. I might say that I have a secure belief that the Yankees won the 1956 World Series, secure to the extent that I am willing to make a large bet on it, but that kind of belief is not the sort that constitutes a worldview. It is different in the case of profound moral issues: Can violence ever be right? Are there constant norms for human life? Is there a point to suffering? Do we survive death?

Finally, the basic beliefs one holds about things tend to form a *framework* or *pattern;* they hang together in a certain way. That is why humanists often speak of a "system of values." All of us recognize, to some degree at least, that we must be consistent in our views if we want to be taken seriously. We do not adopt an arbitrary set of basic beliefs that has no coherence or semblance of consistency. Certain basic beliefs clash with others. For example, the belief in marriage as an ordinance of God does not comport well

with the idea of easy divorce. A conviction that movies and the theater are essentially "worldly amusements" is not very consonant with the ideal of a Christian reformation of the arts. An optimistic belief in historical progress is hard to harmonize with a belief in the depravity of man.

This is not to say that worldviews are never internally inconsistent — many are (in fact, an inconsistency may be one of the most interesting things about a worldview) — but it remains true that the more significant feature of worldviews is their tendency toward pattern and coherence; even their inconsistencies tend to fall into clearly recognizable patterns. Moreover, most people will not admit to an inconsistency in their own worldview even when it is very obvious to others.

It has been assumed in our discussion so far that everyone has a worldview of some kind. Is this in fact the case? Certainly it is true that most people would not have an answer if they were asked what their worldview is, and matters would only be made worse if they were asked about the framework of their basic beliefs about things. Yet their basic beliefs emerge quickly enough when they are faced with practical emergencies, current political issues, or convictions that clash with their own. How do they react to military conscription, for example? What is their response to evangelism or the counterculture, to pacifism or communism? What words of condolence do they offer at a graveside? Whom do they blame for inflation? What are their views on abortion, capital punishment, discipline in child-rearing, homosexuality, racial segregation, artificial insemination, film censorship, extramarital sex, and the like? All of these issues trigger responses that provide indications of a person's worldview by suggesting certain patterns ("conservative" and "progressive" being very rough and unreliable patterns that most people recognize). In general, therefore, everyone has a worldview, however inarticulate he or she may be in expressing it. Having a worldview is simply part of being an adult human being.

What role does a worldview play in our lives? The answer to this, I believe, is that our worldview functions as *a guide to our life*. A worldview, even when it is half unconscious and unarticulated, functions like a compass or a road map. It orients us in the world at large, gives us a sense of what is up and what is down, what is right and what is wrong in the confusion of events and phenomena that confronts us. Our worldview shapes, to a significant degree, the way we assess the events, issues, and structures of our civilization and our times. It allows us to "place" or "situate" the various phenomena that come into our purview. Of course, other factors play a role in this orientation process (psychological or economic self-interest, for example), but these other factors do not eliminate the guiding role of one's worldview; they often exert their influence precisely *via* our life-perspective.

One of the unique characteristics of human beings is that we cannot do without the kind of orientation and guidance that a worldview gives. We need guidance because we are inescapably creatures with responsibility who by nature are incapable of holding purely arbitrary opinions or making entirely unprincipled decisions. We need some creed to live by, some map by which to chart our course. The need for a guiding perspective is basic to human life, perhaps more basic than food or sex.

It is not only our views and arguments that are decisively affected by our worldview, but all of the specific decisions we are called upon to make as well. When the going gets rough in a marriage, is divorce an option? When taxation is unjust, do you cheat on your tax forms? Should crime be punished? Will you fire an employee as soon as it is economically advantageous to do so? Will you get involved in politics? Will you discourage your son or daughter from becoming an artist? The decisions you make on these and many other issues are guided by your worldview. Disputes about them often involve a clash of basic life-perspectives.

Again, we have to admit that there can be inconsistency here:

not only might we hold to conflicting beliefs, but sometimes we might fail to act in harmony with the beliefs we hold. This is a fact about our everyday experience that we must all acknowledge. But does this mean that our worldview therefore does not have the guiding role that we are ascribing to it? Not necessarily. A ship can be diverted from its course by a storm and still be heading for its destination. It is the overall pattern that counts, the fact that the helmsman does everything possible to stay on course. If your action is out of tune with your beliefs, you tend to change either your actions or your beliefs. You cannot maintain your integrity (or your mental health) for long if you make no effort to resolve the conflict.

This view of the relation of our worldview to our conduct is disputed by many thinkers. Marxists, for example, hold that what really guides our behavior are not beliefs but class interests. Many psychologists look on worldviews as more guided than guiding, as rationalizations for behavior that is really controlled by the dynamics of our emotional life. Other psychologists contend that our actions are basically conditioned by physical stimuli coming from our environment. It would be foolish to dismiss the evidence these thinkers adduce to substantiate their views. It is in fact true that human behavior is very complex and includes such matters as class interests, conditioning, and the influence of repressed feelings. The question is what constitutes the *overriding* and *decisive* factor in accounting for the pattern of human action. The way we answer that question depends on our view of the essential nature of humankind: it is itself a matter of our worldview.

From a Christian point of view, we must say that belief is a decisive factor in our lives even though our professed beliefs may be at variance with the beliefs that are actually operative in our lives. It is the command of the gospel that we live our lives in conformity with the beliefs taught in the Scriptures. That we often fail to live up to this command does not invalidate the fact that we can and ought to live according to our beliefs.

What, then, is the relationship of worldview to Scripture? The Christian answer to this question is clear: our worldview must be shaped and tested by Scripture. It can legitimately guide our lives only if it is scriptural. This means that in the matter of worldview there is a significant gulf between those who accept this Scripture as God's word and those who do not. It also means that Christians must constantly check their worldview beliefs against the Scriptures, because failing that there will be a powerful inclination to appropriate many of our beliefs, even basic ones, from a culture that has been secularizing at an accelerating rate for generations. A good part of the purpose of this book is to offer help in the process of reforming our worldview to conform more closely to the teaching of Scripture.

As Christians we confess that the Scriptures have the authority of God, which is supreme over everything else — over public opinion, over education, over child-rearing, over the media, and in short over all the powerful agencies in our culture by which our worldview is constantly being shaped. However, since all these agencies in our culture deliberately ignore, and in fact usually reject outright, the supreme authority of Scripture, there is considerable pressure on Christians to restrict their recognition of the authority of Scripture to the area of the church, theology, and private morality — an area that has become basically irrelevant to the direction of culture and society as a whole. That pressure, though, is itself the fruit of a secular worldview, and must be resisted by Christians with all the resources at their disposal. The fundamental resources are the Scriptures themselves.

The Scriptures are many things to the Christian, but central to their purpose is *instruction*. There is no passage in Scripture that cannot teach us something about God and his relationship to us. We must approach the Scriptures as students, particularly when we begin to think critically about our own worldview. "Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us," says Paul of

the Old Testament Scriptures (Rom. 15:4), and the same applies to the New Testament. That is why the concept of "sound doctrine" is so central in the apostolic witness — not doctrine in the sense of academic theology, but as practical instruction in the life-and-death realities of our walk in the covenant with God. It is by means of that kind of teaching that the steadfastness and encouragement the Scriptures bring will enable us, as Paul goes on to point out in the same passage, not to despair but to hang on to our hope in Christ. That is also involved in what Paul calls the "renewal of our minds" (Rom. 12:2). We need that renewal if we are to discern what God's will is in the full range of our lives — "his good, pleasing and perfect will." Testing our worldview against Scripture and revising it accordingly is part of the renewal of the mind.

This emphasis on scriptural teaching is, of course, a fundamental aspect of the Christian religion. All varieties of Christians, in spite of all their differences, agree on this point in some form or other. Yet it is necessary to stress it again with reference to the question of our worldview because almost all branches of the Christian church also agree that the teaching of Scripture is basically a matter of theology and personal morality, a private sector labeled "sacred" and "religious," marked off from the much broader range of human affairs labeled "secular." The Scriptures, according to this view, should certainly shape our theology (including our "theological ethics") but are at best only indirectly and tangentially related to such secular affairs as politics, art, and scholarship: the Bible teaches us a church-view and a God-view, not a worldview.

This is a dangerous error. To be sure, we must be taught by Scripture on such matters as baptism, prayer, election, and the church, but Scripture speaks centrally to *everything* in our life and world, including technology and economics and science. The scope of biblical teaching includes such ordinary "secular" matters as labor, social groups, and education. Unless such matters are ap-

proached in terms of a worldview based squarely on such central scriptural categories as creation, sin, and redemption, our assessment of these supposedly nonreligious dimensions of our lives will likely be dominated instead by one of the competing worldviews of the secularized West. Consequently, it is essential to relate the basic concepts of "biblical theology" to our worldview — or rather to understand these basic concepts as *constituting* a worldview. In a certain sense the plea being made here for a biblical worldview is simply an appeal to the believer to take the Bible and its teaching seriously for the totality of our civilization *right now* and not to relegate it to some optional area called "religion."

All of this raises the question of the relationship of what I have been calling "worldview" to theology and philosophy. This is a subject of some confusion, since in common parlance any comprehensive perspective on things that appeals to the authority of the Bible is called "theology," and any such perspective that appeals instead to the authority of reason is called "philosophy." The trouble with this way of speaking is that it fails to make a distinction between the life-perspective every human being has by virtue of being human and the specialized academic disciplines that are taught by professors of theology and philosophy. Moreover, it makes the mistaken assumption that theology cannot be pagan or humanistic and that philosophy cannot be biblical. The difference between Christian and non-Christian cannot so easily be divided between two academic disciplines.

Theology and philosophy are specialized fields of inquiry that not everyone can engage in. They require special skills, a certain kind of intelligence, and a fair amount of education. They are fields for trained experts. This is not to say that they are closed to the intelligent layman: it simply means that laymen are at a distinct disadvantage in them, just as they are in medical science, economics, and such nonacademic special fields as high finance and international diplomacy. In all these fields there are professionals — men

and women who are specialists in the area. Theology and philosophy are no exceptions.

But a worldview is a quite different matter. You do not need degrees or special skills to have a perspective on life. Biblical wisdom or sound doctrine does not increase with advanced theological training. If it did, the prophets and apostles, not to mention Jesus himself, would have been quite deficient compared to today's bright young theologians fresh out of graduate school. Academic brilliance is something quite different from wisdom and common sense — and a worldview is a matter of wisdom and common sense, whether biblical or unbiblical.

Without attempting to define precisely the nature of "science" and "theory" (which in this context we can assume to be synonymous), it can be said that philosophy and theology, as academic disciplines, are scientific and theoretical, whereas a worldview is not. A worldview is a matter of the shared everyday experience of humankind, an inescapable component of all human knowing, and as such it is nonscientific, or rather (since scientific knowing is always dependent on the intuitive knowing of our everyday experience) *prescientific,* in nature. It belongs to an order of cognition more basic than that of science or theory. Just as aesthetics presupposes some innate sense of the beautiful and legal theory presupposes a fundamental notion of justice, so theology and philosophy presuppose a pretheoretical perspective on the world. They give a scientific elaboration of a worldview.

In general, then, we can say that worldview, philosophy, and theology are alike in being comprehensive in scope, but that they are unlike in that a worldview is prescientific, whereas philosophy and theology are scientific. The distinction between philosophy and theology can perhaps be made more clear if we introduce two key concepts: "structure" and "direction." Philosophy can be described as that comprehensive (totality-oriented) scientific discipline which focuses on the *structure* of things — that is, on the unity

and diversity of creational givens. Theology (i.e., Christian systematic theology), on the other hand, can be said to be that comprehensive (totality-oriented) scientific discipline which focuses on the *direction* of things — that is, on the evil that infects the world and the cure that can save it. Christian philosophy looks at creation in the light of the basic categories of the Bible; Christian theology looks at the Bible in the light of the basic categories of creation. A worldview, by contrast, is equally concerned with both structural and directional questions. It does not yet have the differentiation of focus characteristic of the comprehensive scientific disciplines.

There is a good deal that can be said about these distinctions, especially about the distinction between structure and direction, but that will have to wait until a later point in our discussion. At the moment we are only touching on it briefly to clarify the relationship between the three comprehensive ways of understanding the world.

Now that we have a general idea of what a worldview is, it remains for us to address the question of what is distinctive about the reformational worldview.

One way of seeing this distinctiveness is to use the basic definition of the Christian faith given by Herman Bavinck: "God the Father has reconciled His created but fallen world through the death of His Son, and renews it into a Kingdom of God by His Spirit." The reformational worldview takes all the key terms in this ecumenical trinitarian confession in a universal, all-encompassing sense. The terms "reconciled," "created," "fallen," "world," "renews," and "Kingdom of God" are held to be cosmic in scope. In principle, nothing apart from God himself falls outside the range of these foundational realities of biblical religion.

The permanent temptation is to restrict the scope of each of these terms in one way or other. Each is understood to apply to only one delimited area of the universe of our experience, usually named the "religious" or "sacred" realm. Everything falling outside

this delimited area is called the "worldly," or "secular," or "natural," or "profane" realm. All of these "two-realm" theories, as they are called, are variations of a basically *dualistic* worldview, as opposed to the *integral* perspective of the reformational worldview, which does not accept a distinction between sacred and secular "realms" in the cosmos.

That is one way of explaining the distinctiveness of the reformational worldview. Another way is to say that its characteristic features are organized around the central insight that "grace restores nature" — that is, the redemption in Jesus Christ means the *restoration* of an original good creation. (By *nature* I mean "created reality" in these contexts.) In other words, redemption is *re-creation*. If we look at this more closely, we can see that this basic affirmation really involves three fundamental dimensions: the original good creation, the perversion of that creation through sin, and the restoration of that creation in Christ. It is plain how central the doctrine of creation becomes in such a view, since the whole point of salvation is then to salvage a sin-disrupted creation. What must be avoided here is the view that grace includes something in addition to nature, with the result that salvation is something basically "noncreational," supercreational, or even anticreational. In such a view, whatever it is that Christ brings over and above creation belongs to the sacred realm, while the original creation constitutes the secular realm.

In the next three chapters we will look at the three basic biblical categories of creation, fall, and redemption. Thus far we have talked rather abstractly about the reformational worldview in order to place it in the broader context of Christian worldviews as a whole. Now it is time to become more specific, relating the reformational worldview to both the central themes of Scripture and the basic realities of our cultural and societal experience.