

“*Rethinking Worldview* throws off sparks able to light the dry tinder that many Sunday school classes and seminary seminars have become. J. Mark Bertrand’s four worldview pillars, his explanation of how to move from consumer to critic to contributor, his discussion of personal unity and diversity within the Trinity, and much besides, make this book worth having and giving.”

—MARVIN OLASKY, editor-in-chief, *World* magazine

“The strength of Bertrand’s book is its comprehensiveness, as the author turns the prism of worldview until every angle has been illuminated. Bertrand maintains our interest throughout his long discussion with an incipient narrative thread in which his understanding of worldview is told as the sum of his own discoveries and experiences in relation to worldview. The book actually has the quality of a suspense story in which the reader is led to wonder what Bertrand discovered next in regard to worldview.”

—LELAND RYKEN, professor of English, Wheaton College

“*Rethinking Worldview* is an engagingly written work to strengthen believers in their efforts to engage the world in a winsome and effective manner. Built around the themes of worldview, wisdom, and witness, this excellent book provides an illuminating and thoughtful way forward for the twenty-first-century church to think, live, speak, and worship. Mark Bertrand has made a splendid contribution to the ongoing conversation regarding Christian worldview thinking. After reading this book I wanted to shout “Yes, and Amen!” I heartily commend this book and trust that it will receive a wide readership.”

—DAVID S. DOCKERY, president, Union University

For those of you suffering from “worldview fatigue,” or who think it’s a theologically unhelpful concept, or who are new to the notion altogether, read this book. It’s like a satisfying draught of ice-cold, refreshing water on a hot summer day! It offers reinvigorating approaches to the priceless Christian worldview concept, properly focuses our attention on its wisdom-giving properties, and propels us to full-bodied Christian witness and cultural engagement on its basis. Bertrand’s book is a rich gift to serious citizens of the kingdom of God.

—DAVID NAUGLE, professor of philosophy, Dallas Baptist University;
author, *Worldview: The History of a Concept*

Learning to Think, Live, and Speak . . . Online!

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(RE)THINKING

Learning to Think, Live, and Speak in This World

WORLDVIEW



J. Mark Bertrand

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Rethinking Worldview: Learning to Think, Live, and Speak in This World

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Preface

What This Book Won't Do



In the old days, authors introduced their books with an apology, taking advantage of the dual meanings of the word. They begged indulgence for the shortcomings of the work, and at the same time offered a defense of why it was written in the first place. If you ask me, that was a fine tradition, and I'd like to revive it here.

This is a book about worldview, which means it will touch on matters of theology, philosophy, and culture. These are deep waters, and I admit at the outset that I'm not the most authoritative guide. I make no claims to expertise. Instead, I am a fascinated amateur. In a field packed with professional ministers, theologians, historians, and philosophers, I am a layman. If anything, my sensibility is more artistic than academic—a fact that will no doubt drive some readers crazy, though I hope it will open up unexpected vistas, too.

As the title *Rethinking Worldview* suggests, these pages represent a two-pronged invitation. First, this is a call to rethink and reevaluate your own perspective on the nature of reality. You are right about some things, wrong about others; and perhaps this is an opportunity to ensure that the balance tips the right way.

Second, I invite you to think again about the idea of worldview itself. So much has been written on the subject—much good, some not—that it has become familiar, even commonplace. In some ways, the popular understanding of the concept is deficient, and as a result, those quick to dismiss it as old-fashioned might be operating without a good, nuanced grasp of what worldview thinking really is. Hopefully, reading this book will stimulate a desire to take a second, deeper look.

What to Think, How to Think

For all its ambition, there are some things this book will not do, and we might as well establish them up front.

This book will not tell you what to think.

It does not include a catalog of official Christian viewpoints on theological, philosophical, or political matters. For the most part, it is not polemical. We will not be considering the shortcomings of various public policies and formulating idealistic alternatives. That really is the realm of experts, and while I am as opinionated as the next man, and as convinced that my ideas, if implemented, would usher in a golden age, I know that everybody else thinks the same thing, and for reasons just as sound (or unsound, as the case may be).

No, this book will not tell you what to think—but that is a common enough caveat. Most authors say something along these lines: “I won’t teach you what to think; I’ll teach you *how* to think.”

Noble as that sentiment might sound, this book will not teach you *how* to think, either.

As a young man, I read many, many books that made this claim and never found one that actually delivered. Later, when I became a writer and teacher myself, I always tried to be careful never to set such ambitious goals. My aim is to inspire reflection and action; so think of this book as a conversation, where you are free to elaborate and dissent.

The greatest compliment I have ever received came from a student who sat quietly in the back of a weekly Bible study I once taught for college students. He approached me after a particularly long group discussion and said, “What I like about your class is that you don’t talk down to us. You treat us as equals.” Those words stuck with me, and whenever I find myself straying from that ideal, I try to shut up.

As a result, in the chapters that follow you will discover my thoughts on a variety of topics, and you will encounter them in the way I think them—which might not always be the best method of explaining. I make no apology for this; consider it a sign of respect for the reader.

But I do apologize for the inevitable fact that, like many authors, I have bitten off more than I can chew. This book covers subjects too wonderful for me to express, and there will be rough patches along the way, places where my limitations are shown to least advantage. I have attempted to smooth them out, to provide the most reliable account possible, but there is a virtue in allowing some of these shortcomings to make

it onto the page. It is my way of saying, “I think this is so, but I could be wrong.” It goes without saying that for final authority, look to God and not this book.

Parallel Reading

With that in mind, I have one request to make. If you are going to invest the time required to digest this book, I ask that you read it in tandem with Scripture. Many Christians read from the Bible daily as a matter of course, but if you haven’t cultivated this habit, I ask that you adopt it at least temporarily. This book, after all, is ultimately a derivative work, a book about a book. It leans against Scripture as an injured man leans on his crutch. To make the most of it, you as a reader will need to do some leaning of your own.

There are many reading plans available to guide you through the Bible, and there is always the option of starting at Genesis 1 and moving forward. If you have a method of your own, by all means employ it. If not, let me suggest an expedient. Begin in the New Testament with the Gospel of John and then keep going through Acts, Romans, and beyond. This will keep the good news of Christ, the history of the early church, and the essentials of sound doctrine in the forefront of your mind as you read *Rethinking Worldview*. I have tried to create a book consistent in every way with that parallel reading, but being finite and fallen I have no doubt failed. Where you find friction between your Bible reading and what you see here, set aside my errors in favor of truth.

An Introduction and a (Re)Introduction

This book is an introduction to worldview thinking and its implications for people new to the concept, and a reintroduction to those who, like me, have not always found particularly helpful the ways the idea is expressed and applied in the mainstream. It is divided into three parts—worldview, wisdom, and witness—with the conviction that any treatment of the intellectual dimensions of worldview that doesn’t lead into a discussion of how to profitably live and speak in this world is incomplete. If there is one thing I will reiterate time and again, it is the organic relationship between these things.

If worldview thinking is to prove valuable in our lives, it must help make us better believers and doers of the truth. Otherwise it becomes a

mental exercise that breeds arrogance and shores up the false security of intellectual elites.

Before We Begin

I've noticed an interesting trend among some twenty-something evangelicals, a tendency to snigger behind the hand whenever worldview is mentioned. It reminds me of how my generation reacted when older Christians talked about end times portents or rock music. We were jaded. We knew better. The Bible, as far as we could tell, backed our skepticism more than the certainties of our elders.

When I was first exposed to worldview thinking—a kind of Christian cultural critique that involves tracing back the philosophical assumptions that underlie cultural expressions—it was as exciting to me as, say, deconstruction. But then, I hadn't grown up with the idea of worldview. I had not persevered through a thousand youth group lectures on the topic, or been encouraged to diagnose and dismiss everybody else's *ism*. These younger evangelicals have, and to them it is old hat.

I do not agree, but I sympathize. In many ways, the worldview approach that has gone mainstream throughout evangelicalism deserves the sniggering. A lot of people without even rudimentary philosophical training are using pseudo-philosophical language in an effort to reassure equally untrained laymen that their belief systems will stand up to scrutiny. And they do—until they're actually tested. A lot of simplistic scorecards are handed out so that unsophisticated young people can discern the “hidden agenda” of the various scary elites. Worldview thinking has been co-opted by the culture wars, so it is no wonder that people disenchanted with those wars have grown indifferent to worldviews, too.

But it shouldn't be that way.

The Disconnect

When worldview analysis is properly applied, it operates as a kind of buttress to the moral argument for God's existence. The reader discovers “Christian” themes, assumptions, and structures in work done by people whose mind-set is anything but Christian, and this raises the question: *why?* Asking worldview questions is a way to open up the culture to deeper scrutiny. It ought to provide a fuller, richer experience of the world around us.

Instead, worldview critiques often function on the pass/fail level, like

a bacteria filter which, applied to our entertainment, cleanses it of harmful influences. The worldview critic reduces what he reads to the level of theme then gives an up or down vote on whether the distilled meaning of the work fits into the biblical worldview. Unfortunately, this turns out to be a way not to engage with the work directly at all. Instead, the art is processed into a set of categories already familiar to the critic, who then applies the standard responses to them. The whole process is depressing to anyone who actually enjoys and benefits from the complexities of art.

If you are one of those people whose eyes glaze over when the “w-word” is mentioned—or worse, one of those people who uses it as a club to bludgeon ideas you haven’t fully grasped—then *Rethinking Worldview* may be just the thing: an attempt to rediscover the benefits of worldview thinking without resort to the baggage that has accumulated over time.

PART ONE

WORLDVIEW



Things Unseen: Rethinking Worldview

Reality can be only partially attacked by logic.

FRIEDRICH DÜRRENMATT



“So you’re writing a book about worldview?”

I must have heard it a thousand times from a thousand different people, each one with a wide-eyed, uncomprehending stare. Not because they had no idea what a *worldview* is—it’s a view of the world, obviously—but because it was hard to imagine why another book on the subject needed to crowd its way onto the shelves. After teaching Christian worldview for several years to high school and college students, I knew what they meant. There were already dozens of exceptional titles on this topic and hundreds of competent hangers-on. Everything that needed to be said about worldviews had already been uttered, emphasized, repeated, underscored, and capped with a series of exclamation marks.

What could I possibly add to all that?

Nothing, I found myself thinking. There was nothing more to say. The ancient author of Ecclesiastes bookends the problem succinctly: on the one hand, there is “nothing new under the sun” (1:9), and on the other, “of making many books there is no end” (12:12). Whenever people asked about my book, whatever explanations I managed to stutter through, the raised eyebrows never lowered and the tone of mild amazement never evaporated.

“So you’re writing a book about worldview? Oh, dear.”

Looking back, I am sure that many of the people who heard about

this book were not so skeptical. It was my own doubts, my own cynicism, torturing me.

The problem is, I don't see the concept of worldview the way other people do. As far as I'm concerned, it's mine. Of course, I realize I did not invent it and up until now have done relatively little to promote it, but still I'm plagued with the blind, intimate regard of a lover for the object of affection. Yes, I am in love with worldviews. From the moment I first discovered the notion, I have adored it. No matter how often I think about them—no matter how many of their problems and shortcomings become apparent to me—I can never seem to exhaust my fascination with worldviews.

My discovery of worldview, however, was like G. K. Chesterton's discovery of orthodoxy. In his famous book by the same name, Chesterton compares himself to a man who has set sail on a quest and made landfall on an isle of mystery, only to find that it is already inhabited and well known to everyone else. By the time I planted my little flag on the beaches of worldview, there were already skyscrapers towering over the tree line.

So when the urge to write, to contribute a slender volume to the growing literature on the subject, finally came to me, I harbored doubts. Whatever there was to say had already been said. Writing another book would be like composing a sonnet in honor of a beauty queen: you are not telling people anything they don't already know.

But I was wrong. The more I studied and taught, the more I realized that there *was* something more to be said, something urgent. As much as I love the worldview concept, and as much good as I believe it has done, I am convinced that the time has come to rethink our assumptions about worldviews. We need to take a second look and make sure that, in adopting the concept so widely and making it such a staple of evangelical discourse, we have not gutted it. I suspect that we have. In streamlining the idea of worldviews for mass consumption, we have been simplistic. We have been pedantic. And worst of all, we have been overconfident.

I know because I have been guilty of all this and more, and writing *Rethinking Worldview* has helped me see it.

What is left to contribute to the conversation about worldview? Plenty. First, we need to recapture a more complex, nuanced appreciation of what worldview really is. Without that, we can't proceed. Second, we need to situate worldview in the larger context of a lived faith, finding out how all this intellectual labor should affect not only the way we think but also how we act. To do this will require a renewed focus on the biblical

concept of wisdom, which is one of those things we tend to talk about rather than practice. Finally, this book will explore the organic connections between worldview and wisdom, and how they express themselves in witness.

As Christians, we want to talk to the world about the gospel of Jesus Christ, and we want them to listen. I believe that a new understanding of worldview coupled with a life of wisdom leads inevitably to profound, powerful witness—and where witness is lacking, perhaps worldview and wisdom are, too. So in these pages we will rethink worldview, restore wisdom to its central role at the heart of Christian living, and seek to regain a credible and creative witness in the culture where God has placed us.

“So you’re writing a book about worldview?”

You better believe it.

Worldview and Its Discontents

What makes the worldview concept, pioneered by philosophers, appropriated by theologians and apologists, and now embraced by evangelicals around the globe, so compelling? Of all the insights that have percolated within the ivory towers over the last century, why has this one captured the imagination of so many thinkers—and why has it found such traction in the popular mind?

In part, the reason lies in how obvious the concept is once explained: the notion that everyone has a unique perspective, that we interpret facts through the lens of some theory about life, seems self-evident. “It’s common sense,” people say. This is something the average man already knows without needing some academic to tell him so.

Another reason for the popularity of worldview thinking is that, in a fragmented society where each of us feels embattled on some point or another, it is comforting to realize that our opponents in the culture war—whoever we conceive of them to be—are, by definition, blinded by their own perspective. No one is purely objective. Our view of the world is colored by upbringing, class, ideology, and experience. So what if our enemies muster powerful arguments against us? So what if “facts” and “reason” seem to be on their side? They are starting from their own prior commitments, and we are starting from ours. Ultimately, none of our basic assumptions are subject to challenge. We may not be able to prove “them” wrong, but they cannot prove us wrong, either. Or so the thinking goes.

When an idea hits the mainstream, it is invariably simplified and

streamlined. This has happened to the worldview concept in spades. At one extreme, it becomes a form of relativism: everyone has a worldview; worldviews are inherently subjective, so everyone's perspective is equally valid. At the other end of the spectrum, the worldview concept becomes the key to establishing the priority of one perspective over all the others: everyone has a worldview, but only one is ultimately coherent, so all the others are equally invalid. The irony is that partisans on each end of the divide employ similar terminology, but to different purpose.

Evangelical Christians have tended toward the latter extreme, and no wonder: the worldview concept offers a way to assert the superiority of our faith and deconstruct every opposing ideology, religious and secular, in one fell swoop. In addition, because it is such a bookish, educated notion, worldview thinking offers a much-needed counterweight to the tradition of anti-intellectualism that so many evangelicals now want to leave behind.

That is certainly what attracted me. My first exposure to worldview came through Christian apologists like Francis Schaeffer, a voice in the late twentieth-century wilderness who gave evangelicals permission to use their minds again in church. Here was a believer who did not shrink from an intellectual challenge. He did not cloister himself in some faraway spot where his faith need never be defended. At the high tide of modern confidence in science and rationalism, Schaeffer was arguing that after all, none of it—the world, life, the mind, the imagination, the body—made any sense unless God, as revealed in Scripture, really existed. Like many others, I was swept up in the confidence of that proposition, buoyed by the hope that, even if I myself could not understand the reason why, ultimately, intellectually, one simply *must* accept the truth of the Christian faith.

I knew that there was more to faith than intellectual assent. I knew that when Jesus commissioned the church to “make disciples,” he had more in mind than changing people's worldview. But as an apologetic tool—and frankly, as a psychological crutch, as a justification for why a well-read, middle-class, academically minded man of the late twentieth century, with an advanced degree and more than a passing knowledge of philosophy (including Nietzsche, who had searched for God's pulse and found none, and Bertrand Russell, who had written emphatically, if not always persuasively, about why he was not a Christian), should not be scorned and dismissed out of hand for his faith—worldview thinking was a panacea.

The first thing worldview thinking established in my mind was that Christian faith is coherent. What the Bible teaches about God, man, and the world holds together. It has the strength of internal consistency. If anything, it is too consistent, too neat, since every challenge, every paradox, can be explained by the fact that God is omnipotent and we are finite. There are some matters, as God emphasized to Job at the tail end of the Bible's account of that righteous man's suffering, that are simply too dark for us to probe.

This sense of consistency was important to me, and still is, because the modern assumption that religion is simply myth and superstition runs strong in our culture. In the early twentieth century, liberal and fundamentalist alike agreed on the radical divide between faith and reason, each seeking to neutralize one by means of the other, and today we still live in the shadow of that settlement. Americans accept, for example, that a person elected to public office will make decisions based on his ideological framework. But if that framework is religious, we grow suspicious. Faith is a private affair, a matter of the heart. In the public square, reason is the arbiter—in name, if not in practice. Is it any wonder that, growing up in these circumstances, thoughtful Christians are drawn toward anything that might explain that we are not unsophisticated dupes—or at least, that our position is defensible from the point of view not only of faith but of reason too?

Evangelicals see themselves as an embattled people. Later, I will take up the topic of siege mentality and how our fear of impending collapse has sometimes led us to justify what in Christ's name is unjustifiable. For now, suffice it to say that we often find ourselves on the defensive, and defensive people tend to be shrill, uncertain, and unconvincing. So the worldview concept instilled me with confidence: there was no need to feel threatened by the world outside—the world that, as a Christian, I was called to be in, but not of. My Christian worldview was intellectually respectable. In fact, it had given birth to a rich and varied (though by no means spotless) tradition. Men and women with a faith like mine and a hope like mine were responsible for much of the good in the culture I had inherited. Instead of apologizing for my faith, worldview thinking convinced me to speak up for it.

When I did, I uncovered another obvious truth: other people have a worldview, too. They are not as impressed as I am that Christianity is a coherent way of seeing the world. The same could be said of Nazism or Stalinism. It is all very well to argue that Christians have a defensible

theory of life, but what makes my worldview better than anyone else's? In fact, how can I argue with credibility for the Christian worldview when my own co-religionists cannot agree on what it is? We evangelicals are noted for our divisions—and our divisiveness—so to an outsider, all talk of a monolithic Christian worldview seems absurd.

So I said, “The Christian worldview is coherent.”

“Which one are you talking about?” they wanted to know.

For lack of a better answer, I could argue for plain vanilla orthodoxy, the faith embodied in the ancient creeds, or generic evangelicalism, the thin consensus between the denominations that lets us all (mostly, kind of) get along. “That’s the Christian worldview I’m talking about.”

“Well,” they would say, “that’s just your opinion. You have your worldview, and I have mine.”

Being an astute culture warrior, I pointed out: “That’s relativism. You can’t say I have my truth and you have yours. There’s only one truth, and this is it.”

“Says you.”

Those two little words—*says you*—are the most powerful argument in any discipline: theology, philosophy, even domestic harmony. They are powerful because they are true. Whenever you say something, it is *you* who says it. You. And what do *you* know? Who are *you* to speak? Please, get real. You? Why should I listen to you? It is the perfect comeback—just ask your spouse. One of the beauties of the “says you” defense is that if your opponent responds that it is a logical fallacy or some other such rationalist nonsense, you can fold your arms, smile knowingly, and declare, “You’ve just proved my point.” Argument won, game over.

You say your worldview is better than mine? Well, who are you?

Point taken. Somewhere along life’s journey, I realized that I could denounce people as relativists for only so long before even I grew bored. After all, it is hard to dismiss as an imbecile the very person you are trying to win over. It is one thing to defend Christianity as a viable option, but quite another to cast it convincingly as the one, the only, option.

We do not fully understand an idea until we grasp its limits.

In coming to terms with this difficulty, I was starting to grasp the limits of the worldview concept. As a defensive measure, it was brilliant. As a contemplative measure, it was also superb. By thinking of the implications of my faith systematically—to the extent that anything can happen systematically in something as disorganized and inefficient as my mind—I was reminded that to be a Christian is, first and foremost, to be one who

follows or imitates Christ. My faith involved a transformation: I was called to be like Christ, to be “conformed to his image.” That is what we call sanctification. It implies a lifetime pursuit of godliness, and I found that worldview thinking overlaps helpfully with this idea. It reminded me that God’s perspective on reality is the correct one—as creator, he has the first and last word—and that my own viewpoint (like my own actions) would be measured against that standard. Worldview consciousness encouraged me to pursue the mind of Christ.

In a sense, worldview thinking helped to justify my position as a believer. I did not come to faith as a result of it, but once I was there, it gave me a way to understand what had happened in my life. It also provided a way to understand why what happened to me did not happen to everyone. But I could not find a way to communicate this insight to anyone who did not already share it.

If you are already a Christian, then worldview is a revelation, but if you aren’t, the concept alone will not move you. In fact, it might do just the opposite, driving you to the other extreme where everyone has a worldview and all worldviews are equally valid.

Some worldviews are better than others. This much was obvious. But if I said as much, or if I went further and said that the Christian worldview (however you defined it) was the best of the lot and, as Schaeffer said, the only one that makes sense of the world as it really is, then the unbeliever had a ready answer, one that I could not easily dismiss.

He said: “Oh yeah? Prove it.”

I am not such a cynic that I believe this cannot be done. There are arguments—a host of them—that reinforce Christianity’s claim. During the course of this book, we will look at more than a few. But this is the moment to shift gears and look at what worldviews really are. Already, we have established that everyone has a worldview. How did we get it? How is it formed? Is it possible by persuasion and logic to change it? Important questions, and before we can begin to talk about “proving” the Christian worldview, we need to explore worldviews at greater length.

How Worldviews Are Formed

Here’s how they work: first, things happen. Events occur.

You observe them happening to other people; you experience them happening to you. These events produce emotional responses: joy, sad-

ness, fear, worry, scorn, mirth. They also serve as catalysts for thought. When you think about what happens, you arrange events. You search for meaning, or at least for patterns, in what has taken place. You begin to draw conclusions about the way the world works.

Based on these conclusions, you face the future with certain expectations and prejudices, hopes and anxieties. New experiences, new ideas, new people are all interpreted in light of the conclusions you've already reached. A kind of belief system emerges, and you are only partially aware of how it works.

When certain things occur, you expect particular results to follow. If they don't, you might adjust your system—or, as sometimes happens, you might refuse to see. You trust certain people and distrust others, scorn certain messages and revere others, and all this happens in the shadow of what has gone before.

Our image of ourselves as neutral, unbiased observers is naïve. We are engaged and engulfed in the world around us, not detached from it. Whether we realize it or not, we have taken sides. Just like a political party, we have created a platform, a platform that draws from many sources, a platform about which we have an incomplete awareness. And this process creates what we call a worldview.

Interpreting Reality

A worldview is an interpretation of influences, experiences, circumstances, and insight. In fact, it is an interrelated series of interpretations—and it becomes a method of interpreting, too. A worldview is something you are aware of only in moments of crisis or contemplation. In ordinary time, it is like a pair of glasses or contact lenses. You are so accustomed to looking *through* it that you barely notice it's there.

Eyeglasses are an often-used metaphor for worldview. The famous French chanteuse Edith Piaf is best known for her standard “La Vie en Rose,” life through rose-colored glasses. When we describe someone as wearing rose-colored glasses, we mean that he doesn't see the world as it really is; instead, everything takes on the rosy hue of the lens through which he views it.

This metaphor applied to worldview suggests that every perspective is like a pair of tinted shades. It only serves to color your perception of the world. But there is a better way of approaching the question. Don't think of your worldview as sunglasses. Instead, think of it as a pair of

prescription lenses. The task of every worldview is to see the world as it is, to correct your vision. The test of a good worldview will be whether it brings reality into sharp focus or leaves things blurry.

And I happen to be speaking from experience.

Growing up, I was the kid who preferred reading to recess and chose the library over the playground whenever possible. My parents always warned me about reading in poor light, but let's face it: low lighting sets the mood. I'm not sure when my vision began to deteriorate, but at some point, perhaps as early as junior high, I became nearsighted.

This isn't a problem when you read—to this day, I can read without the aid of glasses—but it can definitely cause trouble when you're trying to catch a football. Fortunately, bookworms don't do much of that, so it wasn't until I learned to drive that my vision became a problem.

One afternoon I was riding home from high school with my cousin Jeff. He had recently gotten glasses and as he drove, he read off the signs that we passed. I was amazed at how far he could see. Up until that moment, I had never suspected that my own vision was faulty, and to be honest, I didn't wonder even then. Instead, I remember thinking that Jeff's glasses must have given him better than 20/20 vision, since he could see even farther than I could. I just assumed that whatever I could see was the objective standard.

When I was behind the wheel, my poor vision wasn't as much of a handicap as you might think. Because we lived in a small town, I had the streets memorized long before I had to drive them. I never had to consult street signs, and so it never bothered me that I couldn't read them. To make matters easier, I attended a church school where students worked in individual workbooks instead of in traditional classes, so I never had to strain my eyes to read what was written on the blackboard.

It is amazing to think that a young man with what I later discovered was 20/80 vision was capable of performing normally in every area of life (aside from catching footballs), never suspecting the deficiency of vision.

But when I left the closed system of a small town and headed for college, my assumption that I was seeing things clearly was challenged. I had to sit near the front of the classroom to have any hope of reading what professors wrote on the board. My slit-eyed concentration made up for the years when I should have had to squint but didn't. Still, I didn't realize my eyes were the problem—I just figured *everybody* at the back of the room had a hard time reading the blackboard.

The crisis only came to a head when my father visited in the middle of

my first semester. Before leaving for college, I had sold my car, so I traveled as a passenger through my new surroundings, never really grasping the lay of the land. When my dad let me borrow his rental car to give my friends a ride, a disaster was in the making. It was eight o'clock at night in a town where I had never driven before. Snug behind the wheel, I worried about getting lost on the way from his hotel to the campus—but I stopped worrying the moment I backed into the truck behind me!

Busting the tail light in a rental car is not a good feeling, but I didn't blame myself. After all, I never saw the truck behind me. Fortunately, all the damage was to my car, and the truck was unscathed. So I scooped up the pieces of the tail light, put them in the glove compartment, and headed out into the night, still oblivious.

And that's where the real problems started.

When you have 20/80 vision, you don't see very well at night. The headlights up ahead dazzled and disoriented me. The unfamiliar roads took on a sinister aspect. Soon I was gripping the wheel convulsively to keep from shaking, and I was driving slow—very slow. Grandmas were blowing past me on the highway. My forehead beaded with sweat and I plunged into the depths of panic. I prayed out loud, promising never to drive again if I could just make it to the campus alive. Approaching headlights grew so big I thought they would engulf me. By the time I made it to the college to pick up my friends, I was a nervous wreck. I still didn't know what had happened, but I was ready to give up driving forever.

Fortunately, my dad suggested glasses as an alternative.

The Standard for Seeing

During my visit to the optometrist, I was never asked how I would like to see the world. Eye doctors do not have much of an appreciation for subjectivity; they are sold on 20/20 as an objective standard. Unfortunately, they *did* ask me what kind of frames I would like, and this resulted in a pair of large glasses with gray plastic frames that made me look like a wannabe science teacher.

Nevertheless I could see. In fact, with my glasses I was able to discover some things for the first time. Street signs were a revelation, for example, and I was now free to sit in the back row of the lecture hall, where I could not only read what the professor wrote on the blackboard but also see the smudges of chalk on his pants. Thanks to my corrected vision, I was also able to see and recognize people as they approached me in the hallway, so

the reputation I'd had for snubbing them (when, in fact, I simply didn't recognize their blurry faces) disappeared.

Ideally, a worldview should serve the same purpose as my glasses. It isn't there to turn reality pink; instead, it brings things into focus. Of course, not every worldview accomplishes this, and the metaphor of eyeglasses suggests a reason why: worldviews disagree on what the standard or starting point of interpretation should be. Unless you adopt 20/20 as the standard, you won't achieve clear vision. By the same token, to account for the world as it really is, a worldview must share certain standards that are built into reality.

Building a worldview is a tricky business, and we are not entirely in control of it. Imagine this: your optometrist diagnoses your nearsightedness and then leaves you with some glass and a grinder and tells you to make your own lenses. That's what constructing a worldview is like, and that's why it is a lot easier to *talk* about worldview than to understand it. We are all fashioning a pair of glasses, but we do it badly, with unfamiliar tools and conflicting ideas about what clear vision really is.

Do I Choose My Worldview or Does It Choose Me?

When we talk about worldview, too often we make the assumption that human beings are in complete control of the way they view the world. We envision some ideological buffet stocked with different worldviews—Buddhist, Christian, Atheist, Marxist, Agnostic, Muslim, and so on—and each of us gets to pick one. As Christians, of course, we should pick the Christian worldview, and we should also be telling people what's wrong with the other views on offer, so that they will pick our worldview, too.

But do I choose my worldview or does my worldview choose me? Now this sounds like a trick question, doesn't it? I sure hope so, because it is. On the one hand, we have already seen that worldviews are shaped by our circumstances as much as by our choices, so it seems too simplistic to declare, "I choose my worldview." Then again, my worldview isn't some force of nature outside of me—without me, it can't really exist—so how can I say, "My worldview chooses me"?

And if I can't say yes to either proposition, there is another sense in which I *must* say yes to both. Yes, I choose my worldview. My choices (or, at the very least, my reactions) shape my subsequent approach to interpretation. Yes, my worldview chooses me. The circumstances to which I react form the range within which I operate, the conclusions to which I

am likely to come, and (through the process of refinement) the stronger parts of my worldview assert themselves over the weaker ones, straining toward consistency.

The Aggressive Environment

Man is an interpreter. Place him on a desert island and before long, he will develop systems and stories to explain how he got there, why he is there, what he should do, and what is happening around him. So we might say that forming worldview is our natural response to our environment. But a lot depends on what you think that environment is doing.

Is it sitting back at a safe distance from us, waiting to be observed? If that's how you view it (and many people do), then you might think of forming worldview as tinkering with a car engine. It's something you do deliberately, perhaps on weekends, and the raw material waits for you to rebuild it. This is actually a very comforting image. You can make this adjustment or that one, change this or that filter, rev the engine, listen to the sound, and fine-tune your worldview until it really purrs. In the meantime, you can store it in the garage. According to this model, forming worldviews is a classroom exercise, not unlike a problem in engineering.

But is this a convincing account of how life shapes us?

Of course not.

Instead of waiting until we are at leisure to consider it, our environment constantly moves in on us, forcing itself on us, exerting pressure. Forming worldview is an active response to this aggression. It is not an academic exercise; instead, it is a form of mental self-defense. Forget about the car mechanics and imagine one of those martial arts movies where the hero holds the center while adversaries circle and rush in for the assault. Every kick and punch, every block, parry, and evasion is a worldview response.

This model does justice to the rough and ready nature of worldview thinking, to the core principles we cling to like a set of reliable moves that, executed consistently, will exploit gaps in the opponent's attack and use his own momentum against him.

If we keep this sense of struggle in the foreground of our concept of worldview, the question of whether we choose our worldview or it chooses us can be answered with a resounding (and seemingly inconsistent) yes. To the extent that we exert ourselves against the pressures, we are forming a worldview, and to the extent that the pressures are shap-

ing our responses, they are changing and polishing and demolishing that worldview. And this is happening constantly, whether we are alive to the struggle and engaged in it or not.

Ambiguities remain: How much of your worldview is conscious, how much is unconscious? Is your worldview a set of fundamental beliefs or doctrines, or is it some kind of substructure beneath these doctrines, enabling them? Is your worldview just a myth, a story you tell yourself to allay your fears? To answer these questions, we have to pose another: What is worldview for? As simple as it is, this question is often overlooked. Why do we form a worldview? What good is it? What purpose does it serve?

The Navigational Chart

Your worldview serves the same purpose for you as a navigational chart does for a sea voyager. It tells you where you're going, what to expect, and how things are related to one another. Comparing your worldview to a modern map can be misleading, though. There are so few gaps in our geographical knowledge and so many in our view of the world.

So instead of a modern atlas, think of the old nautical charts mariners once relied on, the ones with sketchy outlines of unknown coasts, uncharted islands, and sea serpents coiled in the margin. We sneer at such things now, but think of the remarkable men who traveled the world with no better idea of its true dimensions than this. They were ready to plunge into the unknown and chart the course as they went. The way they navigated through unknown seas is quite similar to the way we navigate life.

Back then, the world was just so much uncharted territory, the maps based as much on speculation, guesswork, and tall tales as on observation. Sometimes the maps were right, but often they were wrong. A sailor who trusted in them uncritically might be lost. But as his map proved useful, he learned to trust it more. Over time, the maps were corrected until they became increasingly accurate, and today we think of maps as utterly reliable—so much so that we tend not to prefer one brand (for example, Rand McNally) over another, since we assume that they are all equally accurate.

The sailor's relationship to maps can teach us something about our own understanding of worldviews:

1) *Worldviews should be trusted, but not uncritically.* Maps change as new discoveries are made. No nautical navigator would insist, for

dogmatic purposes, that his map could never change, that it had to be right no matter what. You don't refuse to believe in the coral reef that just tore open your hull just because it wasn't on the charts! By the same token, our fixed ideas should not be so inflexible that we cannot make new discoveries.

2) *Much remains to be discovered.* Navigators of old understood that a map didn't lose its value just because it left some details sketchy. In a good map, there is always something left to be discovered. Our belief systems function in a similar way: they are incomplete but constantly growing. Admitting this does not devalue the Christian worldview; rather, it acknowledges that individual Christians realize how far they have to go before claiming to have the mind of Christ.

3) *The scale of objects and their relationship to each other is sometimes distorted.* The perfect belief system would not only get everything correct, but it would also organize things in right relation to one another. Our imperfect understanding, however, is distorted in the same way that Antarctica and Greenland are on a globe—the perspective of the map makes them appear larger than they really are. Sometimes you can hold to true beliefs and still lose perspective.

We navigate life with imperfect worldviews that sometimes help and sometimes hinder our understanding of what's happening around us. When we are young, our maps are filled with uncharted territory—and sometimes we fill them in carelessly, because we aren't always good and attentive observers. In spite of their faults, we often cling to our maps even when they take us to the wrong place again and again, even when they throw unexpected obstacles in our path. So the question becomes, how do we deal with these unreliable maps?

Making Better Maps

I've mentioned already how reliable maps are today. Perhaps I spoke too soon. There is a type of map we all encounter that is notoriously unreliable and yet essential to our daily existence, that is, the maps our friends draw for us.

How many times have you set out for a friend's house with nothing but a hand-drawn map to lead the way? When your friend drew it, she was rushed. Her mind was on other things. She couldn't remember all of the street names (and at least one that she thought she remembered is actually wrong), so instead she gave you landmarks: *Turn right at the*

gas station and then go straight until the second red light; then you'll see a movie rental place—but keep going until you reach the fire station and turn right again; then take your first left and our house will be the one with all the cars parked in front. The diagram looks like a mix between a pirate's treasure map and ancient hieroglyphics. And to make matters worse, all of your other friends say that instead of getting their own directions, they'll follow you. I have been there too many times to count.

But why should this be? After all, we have such reliable charts available. Shouldn't all of our maps be accurate?

The reason our hand-drawn maps are so unreliable is that they are not drawn with reference to the standard. Sure, if we copied them out of an atlas, they would be perfect. But often we rely on memory. We sketch things the way we *think* they are without really knowing. We approximate, even though we know that our maps will get our friends to the right destination only if they happen to correspond to the established standard, in this case the lay of the land.

The word *standard* has already come up in reference to optometry, and now it is making another appearance. The more we acknowledge our subjective limits, the greater we feel the need for some standard outside of that subjectivity upon which to base our knowledge. We look for measuring sticks, for ways of checking a map to tell if it's good or not.

Testing Worldviews

You can test a worldview the same way you would test a map, by asking yourself if it matches reality, if the proportions are right, and if it gets you to the right destination. In more formal terms, we would call these tests correspondence, coherence, and productivity.

If worldviews interpret reality, then the observations from which they are drawn should correspond to reality. Given what we observe in the world around us, what explanation can give an adequate account? Would you trust a belief system that starts from the premise that man is intrinsically good, even altruistic? This is a widely held belief, but even its fervent adherents do not usually behave as if it were true—they've had too much experience with actual people! If we look at people as they really are, we see that they're imperfect, that even the best of us have a propensity toward evil. To correspond to reality, a belief system needs to account for this intrinsic flaw in its description of humanity.

If correspondence appeals to an outside standard, the test of coher-

ence checks for internal consistency. The various pieces of a worldview should *fit*. To the extent that it is cobbled together, flawed by the kind of inconsistencies and contradictions we have already noted, it is naturally unreliable. The logical law of noncontradiction, which states that something cannot be both true and false in the same way at the same time, is an expression of the principle that coherence is a hallmark of truth. Christian apologists attempt to deconstruct other worldviews by showing that their axioms contradict one another. For example, many people want to assert that murder is always wrong, but they reject the underlying assumption that would justify such a belief. After all, how can a worldview that rejects transcendent moral standards say that anything is *always* wrong?

In addition to asking whether a worldview gives adequate explanations for the world around us and is internally consistent, we can also test worldviews by measuring what kind of results they produce. A good belief system should produce good results. It should solve philosophical problems, resolve dilemmas, and put adherents in a better position to understand the world and act within it. This is not a test of pragmatism *per se*—the truth is the truth whether it gets you anywhere or not; but the ability to shine light in dark places is another hallmark of truth. In a sense, the earlier example applies here, too. By condemning murder in every circumstance while denying there are any transcendent moral standards, a person opens up an inconsistency in his viewpoint. By embracing these contradictions, the adherent is confronted with a dilemma, a problem. Worldviews that continually create such problems come to be seen as unreliable, while those that *solve* them are deemed more trustworthy.

These three tools are good as far as they go, but they are not necessarily conclusive. Sometimes a lie seems more coherent and consistent than the truth, so when we ask whether worldviews correspond to reality, whether they cohere and produce results, we have to admit that we're the ones asking—i.e., subjective people and, according to Christian doctrine, fallen too. This is all part of the struggle that is worldview. We are constantly wrestling with ideas while we question our own ability to judge, always acting decisively only to look back with doubts after the fact.

Uncertainties

There is an uncomfortable degree of uncertainty in all of this, which is perhaps one of the reasons why so many Christians who talk about worldview gloss over the problems inherent in such realizations.

I am no different. This chapter is really not the kind of introduction to worldview that I had in mind, but as I prepared for the task I found there was no other kind I could write. The only way to properly prepare the reader for the sense of gratitude that comes from having a God-given, transcendent standard upon which to rely is to dwell first on the doubts inherent in a situation where such a standard is lacking.

Even when we turn to Scripture for guidance, we are called upon to be interpreters, but it is an interpretation informed by the stories and structure of revelation, focused on one whose knowledge is perfect. Where we have doubts, we can rely, not on some point of logic, but on the person of Christ.

Worldview and the Supernatural

My first reservation about popular worldview thinking was the confidence with which it ignores the environmental factors that go into forming our viewpoints. Now, I want to take on another challenge: the way we often suppress the role of the supernatural in worldview formation.

Christians profess faith in a God who is sovereign. We say that God is in control of the circumstances in our lives. If those circumstances contribute to forming our worldview, then we might as well say that God, in what he commands and allows, is active in shaping it, too.

This goes to the heart of the idea of revelation. Theologians distinguish between two types of revelation: natural revelation and special revelation. Not surprisingly, natural revelation consists of the knowledge we receive from living in, observing, and testing nature. Note that it is not nature itself that is revealed, but God who reveals himself in nature—which is why, in Romans 1, the apostle Paul could speak of men plainly knowing God through creation:

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. (vv. 19–20)

That is a remarkable statement when you stop and consider it. Paul is saying that from the moment God created the world, his eternal power and divine nature have been “clearly perceived” in the things he made. The reason mankind is “without excuse” is that we have denied what

is perfectly obvious all around us. Few Christians today, I think, would argue for such an extreme. After all, it isn't true, is it? You don't go out in your backyard, smell the fresh-cut grass, feel the cool breeze, see the divine nature of God and his eternal power, and then fire up the grill. But Paul, in a sense, says that you do. It is a testimony to the mind-clouding effects of sin that we don't see what we are, in fact, seeing.

If natural revelation holds so much power, then imagine how formidable special revelation must be. Special revelation is the category of knowledge that God has revealed outside of nature, specifically in the Bible. There are things in Scripture, points of doctrine, that cannot be known apart from our reading them in its pages. The knowledge of God that comes from nature is, as the theologians say, sufficient to condemn, but not to save. Saving knowledge comes from Christ and the Word of God. We will have more to say about creation and salvation in the pages ahead.

God is at work in the world around us, which means there is a spiritual dimension to every discussion of the gospel. We are not converted to faith by clever arguments. We are not converted even by "evidence that demands a verdict," as important as such evidence may be. Two men can hear the same arguments and see the same evidence, but one believes and the other doesn't. Ultimately there is a mystery in all of this. When Jesus describes the work of the Spirit in John 3:8, he speaks in terms of the wind:

The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.

There will be many moments in life where, in the middle of some conversation—perhaps in some argument you are not handling very well—you will hear that sound, without knowing where it came from or where it is going, and the whole complexion of the encounter changes. When it happens, just hold your tongue and respond in awe. The Spirit's work is the unpredictable X-factor in our worldview discussions. It quickens what would otherwise be a dead exchange.

Changing Our Worldview

On top of the outside pressure and our response to it, our worldview is shaped by the Spirit's work, and there is simply no way to quantify these

efforts. But the outcome of the whole process is that *worldviews never stand still*.

So the question isn't whether they can be changed, it is whether *you* can change them—and if so, how?

In a sense, we have already answered the first part. If your choices and responses contribute to the shaping of your worldview, then you have the power to change that view at least to the extent that you can make different choices and react in new ways. Now, your choices and responses are not all that goes into your worldview, so this is a qualified affirmative. Yes, you can change your worldview, but only insofar as you can change your actions (and only insofar as your actions actually shape your worldview). Is that complicated enough for you? I am not being intentionally obscure, but I think these qualifications are worth making, so that things don't look simpler than they really are.

To be blunt, some people give the impression that you can change your worldview through study and reason. As valuable as they are, study and the application of reason are not enough. Your worldview is not simply the product of study and reason, so it's wrong to suggest that changing it is a simple intellectual exercise. As you know, it is possible to argue any position convincingly, to twist logic in whatever direction you like, and even to back up every falsehood in the book with brief, thundering proof texts from the Bible. All of these forces lie in that shadowy, subjective realm we have already touched on.

Real transformation, though, comes from outside that realm, originating in the transcendent God. In fact, it might be more precise to say that transformation takes place when the personal, transcendent God goes to work inside a subjective, immanent man. Let's turn again to the apostle Paul. In Philippians 2:12–13, Paul gives this insight into the process of sanctification:

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, *for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*

The sentence in italics speaks volumes. Paul urges the Philippians to apply themselves, to work—literally, to work out their salvation, to bring all of their life into submission to that salvation. This is no exhortation to passivity. Paul does not say, “Sit back, relax, and let God work within

you.” Instead, the Philippians work, and God works in them. They want to please him, they want to work for his pleasure—they really do *want* it—and it is also God working in them so that they want it. The lines between what we do and what God does are blurred to the point that the two things become indistinguishable, inseparable.

So the key to changing your worldview turns out to be, not some profound philosophical quest, but the fundamental journey to Christlike sanctity that every Christian is called to undertake. If you want to change your worldview, to make it a more consistently biblical worldview, then the first and most important thing you must do is work out your salvation in fear and trembling, knowing that it is God working in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. The concept of worldview is one that Christianity inherited from philosophy. We couch it in high-sounding words. But it would be a mistake to think that this intellectual language describes an essentially *intellectual* process.

In life, you encounter unlettered Christians who possess a much greater grasp on the Christian worldview than the scholars who talk so much about it, myself included. Worldview is a spiritual process, and the path to consistent worldview thinking is not intellectual but spiritual.

The Second Look

The French novelist Marcel Proust once set out to change a young man’s worldview, and there is something we can learn from his approach. Alain de Botton tells the story in his book *How Proust Can Change Your Life*, a whimsical application of the famous author’s insight to the self-help genre. The young man in question had a taste for the finer things in life, for beauty and art, but he was trapped in a lower-middle-class home where there was no money for such “frivolities.” He was driven to despair by the thought that he was condemned always to be on the outside looking in, that he would never live a life surrounded by beauty.

This is a common and entirely understandable form of despair. As the invulnerability of youth adjusts to life’s realities, there is a sense of loss even for the things we never had—we mourn that they will never be ours. But suppose that the things we long for really are a part of our lives; we simply do not see them.

According to Proust, the young man who longed for beauty was actually surrounded by it, if only he could learn to see the beauty of everyday things. To remedy the problem, Proust advised the young man to gaze

at the still-life painting of Jean-Baptiste Chardin. Chardin was an artist who shunned exotic settings in favor of simple arrangements of fruit; but through his eyes, there was nothing simple about them.

In spite of the ordinary nature of their subjects, Chardin's paintings succeeded in being extraordinarily beguiling and evocative. . . . There was a harmony, too, between objects: in one canvas, almost a friendship between the reddish colors of a hearthrug, a needle box, and a skein of wool. These paintings were windows onto a world at once recognizably our own, yet uncommonly, wonderfully tempting.¹

If the young man could take a second look at his everyday surroundings, if he could see them through Chardin's eyes, then his despair would give way to delight. As Alain de Botton concludes, it all came down to taking that second look:

The happiness that may emerge from taking a second look is central to Proust's therapeutic conception. It reveals the extent to which our dissatisfactions may be the result of *failing to look properly* at our lives rather than the result of anything inherently deficient about them.²

Failing to look properly—these four words sum up the human condition nicely. Certainly, the whole worldview struggle boils down to a battle for perspective, a fight to see things properly. The passage quoted above lends itself to misunderstanding: you might read it and think that, for therapeutic reasons, we should learn to see the silver lining even in discouraging circumstances, and failing that we should simply choose to see bad as if it were good. *Surrounded by the mundane world and cut off from beauty? That's all right: just pretend that everyday things are delightful to behold!* That is not the point. Failing to look properly is the fault, which implies that there is a right way to see things.

The right perception of reality, however, may not always lend itself to cheerful ends. Sometimes reality is very bleak indeed, and there is enormous social and spiritual pressure not to see it properly. Take, for instance, man's fallen condition. Christian theologians have always strived to convince others to see man as God sees him; from that vision all the rest of Christian doctrine follows. But reaching even this small concession is hard. The eighteenth-century theologian Jonathan Edwards,

¹Alain de Botton, *How Proust Can Change Your Life* (New York: Pantheon, 1997), 135.

²*Ibid.*, 140 (emphasis added).

perhaps the greatest American thinker of his age, fully appreciated this difficulty. According to biographer George Marsden,

Ever since the first glimmerings of his own awakening, [Edwards] was acutely aware that the human problem was to see one's condition in its true perspective. Human self-centeredness was so overwhelming and this world was so alluring, that each person was by nature incredibly short-sighted, self-absorbed, and blinded by pride. People had to awaken to their true interests.³

To awaken to our true interests, to see our condition in its proper perspective, demands the ability to take a second look. There is a spiritual dimension to this: throughout Scripture, blindness and sight are used as signs of unbelief and belief. But at its simplest level, taking a second look requires only a willingness to see things differently, to entertain (at least tentatively) a different interpretation of reality. I say that it requires “only” this, not because it is easy to do, but because the effort is small; what is difficult is recognizing the need to take a second look in the first place.

Changing Other People's Worldview

If we acknowledge that power over our own worldview is only partly in our hands, though fully in God's, then we must also concede that our ability to change other people's worldview is limited. Fortunately, we understand that the Holy Spirit often uses precisely the limited means at our disposal to bring about such changes. This is one instance where an honest assessment of our limitations serves more to encourage than to discourage engagement.

Limiting ourselves to the part of the task that remains in our power, what can we do to change other people's worldview? We can ask gracious and persistent questions and respectfully encourage others to see through new eyes. To do this, we must realize that, while worldview is a proposition, it is also a perspective. It is also a story.

³George Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 120.