

BUILDING A CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW

Grace Bible Church | Fall 2021

PURPOSE

Though we do not often think about it, we all have a worldview—a framework through which we view and understand the world around us and our place in it. This fundamental set of beliefs determines what we think and believe, how we act and assign value, and ultimately how we understand our own existence and purpose. In a day full of competing worldviews, it is vital that Christians have clarity on what Scripture has to say about these big questions. This class will both develop the Christian worldview from Scripture and address other commonly held worldviews in our culture.

RATIONALE

This class will begin by developing the Christian Worldview from Scripture, showing that only God’s revelation provides an accurate framework for understanding the universe as it is and humanity’s place in it. After building this worldview, we will then analyze and evaluate other competing worldviews, showing their inadequacies and shortcomings. In doing so, we will see that only by living according to God’s word will we be able to live in this world in a consistent and meaningful way.

OPTIONAL READING

Beginner

- James N. Anderson. *What’s Your Worldview: An Interactive Approach to Life’s Big Questions*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014.
- James W. Sire. *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalogue*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2020.
- Philip Graham Ryken. *Christian Worldview: A Student’s Guide*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013.

Intermediate

- Francis A. Schaeffer. *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020.
- _____. *How Then Should We Live?: The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1976.
- _____. *The God Who Is There*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1982.
- Nancy Pearcey. *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005.

Advanced

- Carl Trueman. *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 20120.

- Charles Taylor. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007.
- Philip Rieff. *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud*. Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006.

PROPOSED COURSE OUTLINE

Week 1: Introduction: What is a Worldview?

Week 2: Building a Christian Worldview, pt. 1

Week 3: Building a Christian Worldview, pt. 2

Week 4: Clockmaker & Clock: Deism & Naturalism

Week 5: The Abyss of Despair: Nihilism

Week 6: Transcending Despair: Existentialism

Week 7: A New Age: Spiritualism

Week 8: Radical Doubt: Postmodernism

Week 9: The Authentic Self: Expressive Therapeutic Individualism

Week 10: Rise of Tribes: Wokeness as a Worldview

Week 11: Concluding Reflections

WEEK 1 | INTRODUCTION

Christianity is not a series of truths in the plural,
But rather truth spelled with a capital “T.”
Truth about total reality, not just about religious things.

Biblical Christianity is Truth concerning total reality—
and the intellectual holding of that total Truth
and then living in the light of that Truth.¹

WHAT IS A WORLDVIEW AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

WHAT IS A WORLDVIEW?

DEFINITIONS

Philip Ryken

“The structure of understanding that we use to make sense of our world. Our worldview is what we presuppose. It is our way of looking at life, our interpretation of the universe, our orientation to reality.”²

James H. Olthuis

“A worldview... is a framework or set of fundamental beliefs through which we view the world and our calling and future in it. This vision need not be fully articulated: it may be so internalized that it goes largely unquestioned; it may not be explicitly developed into a systematic conception of life; it may not be theoretically deepened into a philosophy; it may not even be codified into creedal form; it may be greatly refined through cultural-historical development. Nevertheless, this vision is a channel for the ultimate beliefs which give direction and meaning to life. It is the integrative and interpretive framework by which order and disorder are judged; it is the standard by which all reality is managed and pursued; it is the set of hinges on which all our everyday thinking and doing turns.”³

James W. Sire

“A worldview is a commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart, that can be expressed as a story or in a set of propositions (assumptions which may true, partially

¹ Francis Schaeffer, in an address at the University of Notre Dame, April 1981.

² Philip Ryken, *Christian Worldview: A Student's Guide* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 19.

³ James H. Olthuis, “On Worldviews,” in *Christian Scholars Review*, 14, 153–64, 1985.

true, or entirely false) that we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic constitution of reality, and that provides the foundation on which we live and move and have our being.”⁴

DETAILED DEFINITION⁵

A worldview is a commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart

Philip Ryken says that “Worldviews are inherently religious.”⁶ That is, our worldview reveals our deepest beliefs and convictions, the presuppositions upon which we build our lives. It is not just a matter of the mind but a matter of the heart; it is a commitment to a framework of belief that manifests itself in every area of our lives.

As one author writes, “The Marxist may claim that human behavior is ultimately shaped by economic circumstances; the Freudian attributes everything to repressed sexual instincts; and the behavior psychologist regards humans as stimulus-response mechanisms. But the Bible teaches that the overriding factor in the choices we make is our ultimate belief or religious commitment. Our lives are shaped by the ‘god’ we worship—whether the God of the Bible or some substitute deity.”⁷ Our worldview stems from what our heart worships.

That can be expressed as a story or in a set of propositions

Though a worldview is neither a story nor a set of propositions, it can be expressed in these ways. For example, the Christian worldview can be expressed as a story of redemption, one that follows the narrative of creation → fall → redemption → restoration. The Christian worldview can also be expressed as a set of propositions, truth statements regarding God, man, sin, salvation, and the purpose of the universe.

The naturalistic worldview can likewise be expressed as a story beginning with the Big Bang and proceeding to the creation of the cosmos, the appearance of life on earth and, ultimately, its disappearance as the universe collapses back into a singularity. Naturalism can also be expressed propositionally, with statements about the nature of matter, absence of the supernatural, and the lack of the transcendent.

When expressed this way, it becomes clear that worldviews answer the big questions of life such as: What is reality? Why are we here? What is our purpose? The answers to these questions give

⁴ James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalogue* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2020), 6.

⁵ Adapted from Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 6–8.

⁶ Ryken, *Christian Worldview*, 21.

⁷ Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005), 23

meaning to life, determine ethics, and guide everyday thought and action (when held consistently).

assumptions which may true, partially true, or entirely false

Worldviews do not always accurately describe the way things actually are; in fact, the plethora of contradictory worldviews in existence necessitates that most will be partially or entirely inaccurate.

Another way to say this is that reality is not plastic. Reality is not moldable or mutable according to our preferences or desires. A table is a table whether we recognize it as a table or not. A man is a man whether we recognize him as such or not. There is either a personal God or there is not. Universal rules of logic like the law of non-contradiction exclude the plasticity of reality. One's worldview, no matter how deeply held, is not necessarily true to reality.

that we hold consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently

Many people would not be familiar with the concept of a worldview, and most would probably have a difficult time expressing their own worldview if put on the spot. Despite this, everyone has a worldview, whether they realize it or not. Even if unable to articulate them, everyone operates on a foundational set of beliefs and convictions about reality and their place in it.

In addition, many people espouse worldviews that they do not consistently live by. For example, many atheist humanists will argue that, though there is no god, it is best to live as though there is one because they recognize that their worldview provides no foundation for the meaning and morality they promote. Thus, they live inconsistently with their own worldview.

that provides the foundation on which we live and move and have our being

To the above point, we should recognize that our own worldview may not be what we think it is. Though we might affirm we hold a patently Biblical worldview, what we believe is so deeply ingrained in us that it will be manifest ultimately in what we say and how we live. It is important that we are familiar with what the Bible has to say about the biggest questions in life and ask ourselves if we really believe and live according to those answers. As Solomon wrote, "For as he thinks in his heart, so *is* he." There is an ordered relationship between thought and action. We are "transformed," Paul says, "by the renewing of your mind" (Rom 12:2). That is, our lives are transformed as our minds are transformed.

TWO ILLUSTRATIONS

A Mental Map – a worldview is like “a mental map that tells us how to navigate the world effectively. It is the imprint of God’s objective truth on our inner life.”⁸ Every human, being made in the image of God, cannot help but try to make sense of this life and thus forms a more or less consistent picture of reality.

Tinted Glasses – a worldview can be thought of as a pair of tinted glasses that color everything we see and how we perceive the world. However, the glasses analogy falls short in that people are aware when they are wearing glasses and can put them on and take them off easily. A worldview, which may or may not be consciously held and is difficult to change or overcome, functions more like our eyes than glasses. We rarely if ever think about the fact that what we see is the electrical and chemical interpretation of light reflected off an object that has entered our eyeball. We simply “see” and act accordingly. In the same way, though we rarely think about or articulate our worldview, we interpret the world through this framework and act accordingly.

COMPONENTS

A worldview addresses several significant areas of life and answers the most significant questions we can ask. One of the difficulties in studying worldviews is determining a method for analyzing a comprehensive system of belief so that it can be objectively evaluated and compared/contrasted with competing options. In *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalogue*, James Sire uses 8 questions to describe the general tenets of a worldview:

- 1) What is prime reality—the really real?
- 2) What is the nature of external reality (that is, the world around us)?
- 3) What is a human being?
- 4) What happens to a person at death?
- 5) Why is it possible to know anything at all?
- 6) How do we know what is right and wrong?
- 7) What is the meaning of human history?
- 8) What personal, life-orienting core commitments are consistent with this worldview?

For the purposes of this class, we will distill these questions into four basic categories that any worldview will address:

- 1) Ontology – the study of concepts such as existence, being, becoming, and reality
- 2) Anthropology – the study of man, including his origins, meaning, and purpose
- 3) Epistemology – the study of knowledge and knowing
- 4) Ethics – the study of morality, what is right and wrong

⁸ Pearcey, *Total Truth*, 23.

We will use these four categories to describe what each worldview studied teaches. They will also enable us to easily evaluate competing worldviews by exposing their shortcomings and inaccuracies.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

CRUNCHING THE NUMBERS

How Many Adults Fall Within These Categories?		
Description of Category	Percent of Adults	Number of Adults
Self-identified Christians	69%	176 million people
Self-identified born-again Christians	35	89 million
Self-identified evangelical Christians	28	71 million
Theologically born-again Christians	28	71 million
Integrated disciples – possess a Biblical worldview	6	15 million

Source: National research conducted by the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University

As you can see from the table above, there is a massive gulf between the number of people identifying as a born-again Christian and those who actually possess a fully-orbed Christian worldview. Of born-again Christians, just over 20% “possess a biblical worldview, and demonstrate a consistent understanding and application of biblical principles.”⁹ This is significant. If we were to apply these numbers to our church, that means that only 1 in 5 of us both understand what the Bible says about life’s biggest questions *and* live accordingly.

BREAKING DOWN THE WALL

Modern society has sought to impose a strict divide between the sacred and the secular. Religion, we are told, must be limited to the individual’s private life but should not spill over into the public sphere. Churches are often reminded that there is a separation between church and state and we need to make sure our views do not spillover into areas where they do not belong.

The sacred/secular divide, however, is a figment of the political imagination. Don’t misunderstand—I’m not advocating for an American theocracy. I’m simply recognizing that everyone has a worldview. Everyone has deeply held convictions that can only be described as “religious,” and it is those convictions that frame how they approach every decision in life, whether they are deciding what career to pursue or which politician to vote for.

⁹ George Barna, *American Worldview Inventory 2021* (Cultural Research Center), August 31, 2021.

As Christians, we hold the one worldview that accurately describes reality as it is and enables a person to live and operate in this universe in a consistent and meaningful way. If this is true, then we should be eager to engage in all areas of life with this framework and should unashamedly advocate for Biblical truth. As Francis Schaeffer said, Christianity is “not just about religious things” but “Truth concerning total reality.” Christianity is Total Truth, and it applies to every area of life.¹⁰

SWIMMING UPSTREAM

In a recent article posted on The Gospel Coalition website Kevin DeYoung wrote:

It is worth remembering David Well’s famous definition: worldliness is whatever makes righteousness look strange and sin look normal. Here’s the reality facing every Christian in the West: the money, power, and prestige of the mainstream media, big time sports, big business, big tech, and almost all the institutions of education and entertainment are invested in making sin look normal. Make no mistake: no matter how good your church, no matter how strong your family, no matter how gospel-centered your Christian school or homeschool, if your children and grandchildren are even remotely engaged with contemporary culture (and they are), they are being taught by a thousand memes and messages every week to pay homage to the rainbow flag.¹¹

DeYoung hits on an important reality Christians too often forget: *the world is not morally neutral*. Jesus called Satan is “the ruler of this world” (John 12:31) and Paul tells us that “the god of this age” blinds the minds of unbelievers to the truth of the gospel (2 Corinthians 4:4). All who are outside of Christ are “following this course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air” (Ephesians 2:2).

The Biblical witness is clear: this world system is against us (John 17:14-16), and we are constantly being bombarded by false worldviews seeking to raise doubts about truth and to draw us away from Christ. DeYoung closes his article with this warning: “The world is already busy promoting its catechism. The only question is whether we will get busy promoting ours.”¹² It is imperative that we know and believe what the Bible says about the world and our place in it. It is equally important that we teach this holistic worldview to the next generation, as well as how to spot and debunk alternate worldviews. Which leads us to our next point. . .

¹⁰ “Christianity is more than a set of devotional practices. It is also a way of thinking about God, about human beings, about the world, and history. For Christians, thinking is believing.” Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), *xiii*.

¹¹ Kevin DeYoung, “The World is Catechizing Us Whether We Realize It or Not,” <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/the-world-is-catechizing-us-whether-we-realize-it-or-not/>

¹² DeYoung, “The World Is Catechizing Us.”

WE'RE LOSING OUR CHILDREN

Several decades ago Francis Schaeffer wrote:

The tragedy of our situation today is that men and women are being fundamentally affected by the new way of looking at truth, and yet they have never even analyzed the drift which has taken place. Young people from Christian homes are brought up in the old framework of truth. Then they are subjected to the modern framework. In time they become confused because they do not understand the alternatives with which they are being presented. Confusion becomes bewildering, and before long they are overwhelmed. This is unhappily true not of young people, but of many pastors, Christian educators, evangelists and missionaries as well.

Even decades ago, Schaeffer saw that a new definition of truth was taking hold of culture, with significant consequences. This effect is in full bloom today, where much of the battle is being fought not over what is true but over the nature of truth itself. This is nowhere more true than in the minds of young people who are consistently assaulted with a faulty view of truth: that truth is personal, relative, and plastic.

Nancy Pearcey said it like this: "It's a familiar but tragic story that devout young people, raised in Christian homes, head off to college and abandon their faith. Why is this pattern so common? Largely because young believers have not been taught how to develop a biblical worldview. Instead, Christianity has been restricted to a specialized area of religious belief and personal devotion."¹³ In short, young people are leaving the church because we have not helped them to see that Biblical truth pervades every area of life. God's revelation is the foundation upon which we must build our entire existence.

¹³ Pearcey, *Total Truth*, 19.