



What Is a “Biblical Worldview?”

By Scott Allen

Google has a nifty app called “Ngram viewer” that allows you to compare frequencies in the use of words or phrases over a period of time by searching its massive online library.

If you enter the word “worldview,” you discover that it first appears in English literature in 1805, but is almost entirely unused until the 1960s. However from 1980 to the present, its use has exploded. If you are like me, you can affirm this in your everyday experience. There is a host of books, conferences, articles, and study programs on “worldview.” In evangelical circles, there is a great deal of talk about “biblical” or “Christian” worldview.

So what’s happening? Why this dramatic spike in interest in “worldview?”

As president of the Disciple Nations Alliance, an international Christian training and discipleship ministry, we’ve made the recovery of a biblical worldview the centerpiece of our mission, so we are a part of the reason for the explosion of interest in this topic. With this background, here are some thoughts on why there is such interest in this topic today.

First, what is a “worldview?” A very simple definition comes from Phillip Johnson in his foreword to Nancy Pearcey’s masterful book *Total Truth*: “Our worldview is the [mental] window by which we view the world, and decide, often subconsciously, what is real and important, or unreal and unimportant.”

Dallas Willard similarly writes: “Worldview ... consists of the most general and basic assumptions about what is real and what is good—including our assumptions about who we are and what we should do.”

These “general and basic assumptions” come to each of us from our surrounding culture. We pick them up from our earliest days, first from our family and later, from teachers, friends, and ultimately from influential figures in the broader culture as filtered through books, films, television, and other forms of media.

As social beings, we are profoundly shaped by our surrounding culture. Every one of us has a worldview. Nobody can “opt out.” Dallas Willard goes on to explain that our worldviews “lie outside our consciousness ... embedded in our body and in its social environment, including our history, language and culture. [Our worldviews] radiate throughout our life as background assumptions, in

thoughts too deep for words.” Philip Johnson concurs: “Our worldview governs our thinking even when—or especially when we are unaware of it.”

The word “govern” is very important here, and it explains why worldviews are so important—they direct our thinking and determine how we act and behave. As Willard says, “there is nothing more practical than our worldview, for it determines the orientation of everything else we think and do ... What we assume to be real and what we assume to be valuable will govern our attitudes and actions. Period.”

A brief clarification is helpful to insert here. I’ve noticed confusion over what a worldview is and how it works. George Barna, the famous Christian researcher, has published studies about how many Christians actually have “a biblical worldview.” He determines this by asking Christians in his research group questions about basic biblical doctrines. His measure of whether someone has a biblical worldview is based on what they know, or head knowledge.

I would argue we can tell what someone’s worldview is, not by what they say, but by what they do—by the choices they make, by how they live their lives. Jesus said, “By their fruit you will know them” (Matthew 7:15-20). As fallen beings, we can all too easily fall into hypocrisy—saying that we believe something, but not acting as if we do. My point is that worldview, properly understood, is that which drives (or “governs”) our actions and behavior, regardless of what we know, or say we know.

If that is “worldview,” what, then, is a Christian or biblical worldview? Here we are talking about that set of assumptions about the world, reality, and human existence that comes to us in three ways: (1) through God’s revelation in Scripture, (2) through creation itself (Romans 1:19-20), and (3) through “the law written on the heart” (Romans 2:15).

The biblical worldview is the only worldview that accurately accords with reality. All other worldviews are distortions of the real world. As Christians, the Holy Spirit works in us through the lifelong process of sanctification, helping us “see” the false assumptions we inherited from our culture, and replace these with the truth. This progression is not complete until we change our actions and behaviors accordingly. In other words, we are in a lifelong process of worldview transformation.

Behind all false, distorted worldviews is Satan, the deceiver. He uses lies and deception at the level of worldview to enslave and ultimately destroy individuals and entire nations. The good news is that God, in Christ, provides a way of rescue. He grants to His followers *repentance* (the Greek word for repentance is “*metanoia*,” or literally, a changing of the mind or worldview), “leading them to a knowledge of the truth” and helping them “come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will” (2 Timothy 2:25-26).

As Christians, we are called to inhabit the culture of God’s Kingdom and to think with “the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:16). We are called “to take every thought captive to make it obedient to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5) and to “be transformed by the renewing of our minds” (Romans 12:2). In short, we are called to think and act differently—not in accord with the accepted norms, attitudes and behaviors of our surrounding culture, but in accordance with reality as presented in God’s Word.

A biblical worldview begins with two foundational assumptions--(1) Jesus is King over all, and (2) His Word is true--and develops as we work out the implications in every area of life.

First, Jesus is King. The Bible makes this abundantly clear. Here are a few passages that describe this, but I could list many others.

Jesus came to [His disciples] and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18).

God exalted [Jesus] to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:9-11).

The Son [Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy (Colossians 1:15-18).

The great Dutch theologian and statesman Abraham Kuyper, reflecting on this prime reality, famously said: "There is not one square inch of the entire creation about which Jesus Christ does not cry out, 'This is mine! This belongs to me!'"

Second, Christ's words are true:

Jesus answered [Pilate], "You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me" (John 18:37).

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my [Jesus'] words will never pass away (Matthew 24:35).

Jesus, in praying to the Father said, "Sanctify them [Jesus' followers] by the truth; your word is truth (John 17:7).

If you build your life on the foundation of these twin truths, you'll end up with a biblical worldview. You'll bow before Jesus as Lord over "every square inch" of creation, and you'll treasure God's Word as an accurate guide to reality—a sure handbook for all of life.

Such a worldview will answer life’s big questions: Who am I, and what does it mean to be human? Is there a God, and what is He like? Does my life have meaning and purpose? Where is history going? Why do bad things happen, why is there evil in the world?

The answers to these questions come from Jesus, the creator and supreme authority over all—the source of all knowledge and wisdom. Whatever I used to think about these things—whatever my assumptions were—need to be evaluated in the light of the Scriptures. Where they are different, I need to literally change my thinking. My assumptions need to come into alignment with the truth. I need to repent.

And this is true, not only for the “big questions.” Because Jesus is the creator and sustainer of all things, we need to learn to think biblically about *everything*. As Os Guinness said, “Christian thinking is not simply thinking about Christian topics. It is the ability to think about anything and everything in a consistently Christian manner.”

Ken Myers of Mars Hill Audio put it this way:

Faithfulness to the Lord of all Creation is ... faithfulness in every realm of human experience, from science to sports, from making movies to making babies, from how we build relationships to how we relate to buildings. Following Christ is a matter first of inner transformation, and then of living faithfully in accord with the order of Creation as he made and is redeeming it, in all of our cultural convictions and practices concerning a host of abstractions and concrete realities: food, sex, time, music, history, language, technology, family, justice, beauty, agriculture, and community.

Here’s the problem. For nearly a century, committed, evangelical Christians haven’t thought this way. We haven’t turned to the Scriptures about how we are to think about food, sex, time, music, history, technology or a host of other things. Rather, we’ve picked up our assumptions about these so-called “worldly” topics from the prevailing culture. We’ve lived a kind of double life: we are Christians on Sundays, but not on Mondays. We turn to the Bible as our authority on spiritual topics like faith, salvation, and evangelism but we’ve left it behind when thinking about almost everything else.

We need to face the sobering reality: For years, the evangelical church has verbally said “Jesus is Lord” but hasn’t really meant it. What it has meant is that Jesus is Lord over a limited, spiritual realm. His Word is truth, but only on spiritual topics.

Because of this, the evangelical church, by and large, isn’t functioning from a biblical worldview. That may sound like a dramatic claim, but it is warranted. Rather than a biblical worldview, the evangelical church worldwide is largely operating from a kind of “two-story” worldview, or what we at the Disciple Nations Alliance refer to as “evangelical Gnosticism.” In the upper story are the spiritual parts of life and reality. Here, we turn to the Scriptures for knowledge and trust Christ’s authority. In the lower story are the seemingly “unspiritual” parts of life – work, sports, sex, marriage, education, science, etc.

Most Christians act as if the Bible does not apply to these topics. They don't see Jesus as having any authority in these areas. Rather they turn to other authorities—worldly experts and teachers—for how to think and function. Again, this two-story worldview is not a biblical worldview. At most, it is a kind of quasi-biblical worldview. It is a syncretistic combination: embracing biblical truth for some things, and adopting the prevailing cultural assumptions for everything else.

The tragedy is that this reality has prevented the church from truly being salt and light in a dying world that God loves and is working to redeem. Rather, we've tended to function in most areas of life no differently than the surrounding culture.

It hasn't always been this way. The early church functioned more consistently from a biblical worldview, as did the church in northern Europe and North America following the Reformation.

How the church lost a biblical worldview and replaced it with an evangelical Gnostic worldview is a long and important story I don't have time to cover here. If you want to familiarize yourself with the contours of that history, go to www.disciplenations.org and enter “A Brief History of the Divided Mind and Life” in the search bar.

The loss of the biblical worldview is the bad news. The good news is that, thanks to God's grace, things are changing. There is mounting evidence that we are living at a “kairos” moment—a pivotal time where old paradigms are giving way and new ones are emerging. God is the Lord of history. He is actively at work in His church, helping it to “see” and repent from evangelical Gnosticism and, once again, embrace a biblical worldview in all its majestic glory, in all its multifaceted personal and social implications.

This really is good news, because historically, when the church has functioned consistently from a biblical worldview, it has been an unstoppable force for social and cultural transformation.

Could it be that we are on the cusp of such a time today? I believe with all my heart that we are, and that God is using the powerful concept of “worldview” to reform and renew His bride, the church.