



DAVENANT DIGESTS

WHAT'S WRONG WITH "WORLDVIEW"?

BRADFORD LITTLEJOHN







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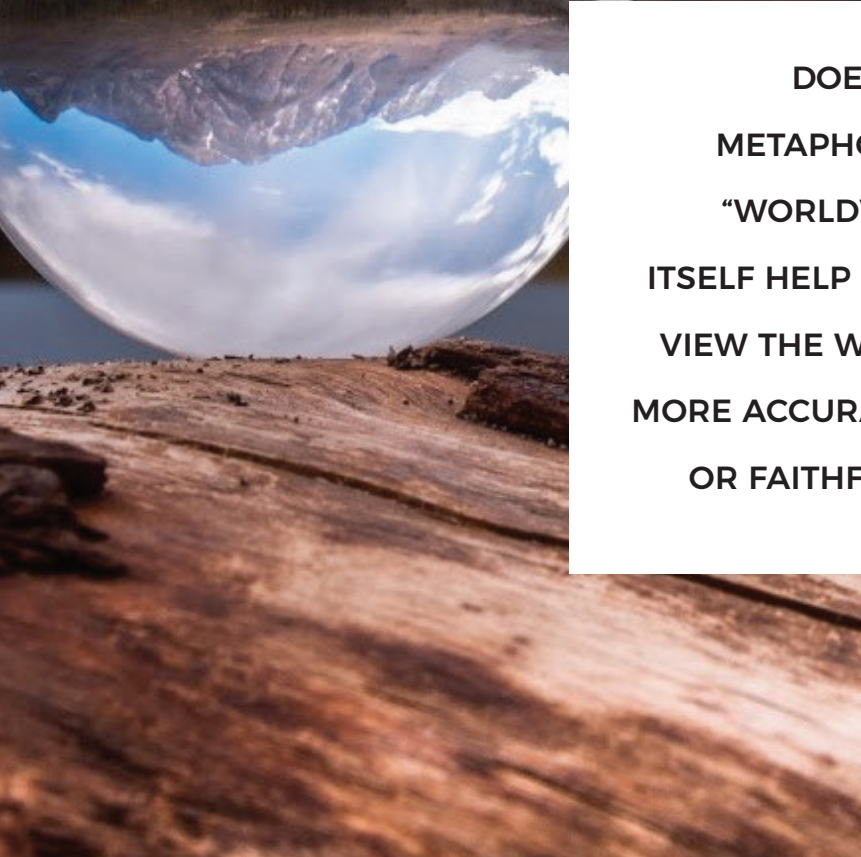


What's Wrong with “Worldview”?

AT THE DAVENANT INSTITUTE, WE'VE BEEN KNOWN TO RIB ON “CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW THINKING” FROM TIME TO TIME, AND WE SCRUPULOUSLY AVOID “WORLDVIEW” LANGUAGE IN OUR PUBLICATIONS AND PROGRAMS. PEOPLE OFTEN NATURALLY ASK WHY.



**DOES THE
METAPHOR OF
“WORLDVIEW”
ITSELF HELP US TO
VIEW THE WORLD
MORE ACCURATELY
OR FAITHFULLY?**



Of course, it's important to say at the outset that, since the "worldview" concept is employed in many different ways by many different people, this is hardly intended as a universal critique. Indeed, even where it is a critique, it is not so much an issue of "right" vs. "wrong" as it is of "helpful" vs. "unhelpful." After all, the concept of "worldview" is fundamentally a metaphor, using the image of sight as a way of describing the way that we think about the world. Is it a useful metaphor or not? Does the metaphor of "worldview" itself help us to view the world more accurately or faithfully? For the most part, I'm inclined to think not.

A Misleading Metaphor

As frequently employed by Christian thinkers today, the term "worldview" is used with a couple of different, though related, connotations—either it means something like a *world map*, or a *set of lenses*. On the first version of the metaphor, "worldview" implies schematized view of the world as a whole that can stand in for an actual knowledge of the detailed geography itself. On the second version, what we have is more of a world-viewer, a set of lenses or an apparatus that someone puts on, which construes the world so that it appears to them in a certain way. Some people put on their materialist glasses and see the world as just a bunch of chaotic molecules bumping together, whereas others put on their Christian-worldview glasses, and see the world as the theater of God's glory. Either way, though the metaphor has its uses, it seems to me at risk of misleading us in at least four different ways (though not every use of the term veers into all four of these ditches).

A-PRIORISM

Whether by “worldview” we mean a map of the world or a set of lenses that we bring to our experience of the world, this way of thinking seems all too a-prioristic. What do I mean by that? I mean that it assumes that our knowledge is mainly a matter of the categories that we *bring to* our experiences, rather than those that *arise from* our experiences. One gets the idea from a fair bit of Christian worldview literature (especially when some conference or course is being advertised) that a worldview is almost like a set of categories you can download, and then march out into the world equipped with the right answers and knowing in advance how to refute the wrong answers. But this is not how people learn—not how they learn real meaningful knowledge and wisdom at any rate. This kind of pre-packaged knowledge turns out to be awfully flimsy and brittle when confronted with the complexities of the real world.

INTELLECTUALISM

Of course, there is truth in the “worldview” idea—it’s not as if we all just come to the world without biases and preconceptions, taking in reality raw and unmediated and converting it straight into objective knowledge. Our construals of the world are deeply conditioned by cultural contexts. But it seems to me that this condi-

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tioning tends to be much less intellectualistic than the worldview metaphor and much worldview-talk implies. To the extent that we are preconditioned to map the world in certain ways, this tends to take place by virtue of rituals, habits, symbols, and forms of community life much more than it does by virtue of conceptual systems. This is something that James K.A. Smith, among others, has been keen to emphasize in recent years against the over-intellectualism of many Christian worldview circles.

RESISTANT TO LEARNING

Another common tendency of worldview thinking is that, to the extent that it can seek to offer a pre-packaged framework of knowledge, it can be remarkably hostile to *learning*. Paul warns about those who are “always learning and never coming to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Tim. 3:7) but some worldview warriors seem to suffer rather from an “always already at knowledge of the truth and never learning” syndrome. If the key thing is to have the right worldview, then once you have that worldview, well, you already have a view



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of the world, you already know your way around. You've got your map and are so confident of its accuracy that you don't bother to actually observe your surroundings. Much of our best learning takes place when our fundamental assumptions are challenged and we have to honestly reconsider them; too often, worldview thinking persuades its adherents that there is nothing that could

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possibly challenge their assumptions, because these are based on a “biblical worldview” and the Bible cannot err. But the Bible’s inerrancy does not, sadly, extend to our deductive system-building.

SELF-CONTAINED

Perhaps the most serious danger of worldviewism (though this tendency is more likely to arise only within so-called “presuppositionalist” circles) is that it might tacitly—if

inadvertently—endorse a kind of postmodern relativism. Consider the unfortunate title of one of the most popular worldview books: James Sire’s *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog*. There is no “universe next door”—there is only one universe, the one we are all called to inhabit and to describe truthfully. And worldviews are not things that you shop for to see which one fits best or is most in line with your sense of style. Although Sire does not intend these implications, to talk this way is to speak the language of the postmodern worldview that most Christian worldview warriors are most determined to oppose.

But it is easy to see how the metaphor might lead this way. Worldview-as-map, perhaps, may not—if there are different maps, but only one reality, then only one of the maps can genuinely orient you. But with the worldview-as-lens metaphor, it is easy to think in terms of different lenses that one can switch

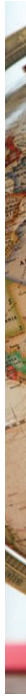
between, yielding different internally-coherent world pictures, without ever having (or being able?) to encounter the world-in-itself. This, in fact, is no coincidence, but testifies to the intellectual genealogy of “worldview,” which translates the German *Weltanschauung*, a term coined by Immanuel Kant in 1790.¹ Kant’s philosophy made a hard distinction between the world-in-itself and the-world-as-constructed-by-our-minds, a distinction that is ironically a favorite whipping boy of many Christian worldview teachers. To talk of a “Christian worldview” risks buying into this idealist and subjectivist construal of the world, in tension with the philosophical realism that characterized almost the entire previous Christian tradition.

The Verdict

ALL OF THESE FLAWS CUMULATIVELY CONSPIRE TO CREATE AN ATMOSPHERE THAT IS HARDLY APT FOR THE CULTIVATION OF INTELLECTUAL VIRTUES.

Worldview warriors are liable to be more interested in having answers than asking questions, in dismissing an opponent rather than engaging him, and in teaching rather than learning. Worldviewism, as often practiced, is not an approach that encourages patience, humility, discrimination, or persuasion. Indeed, since any passion must be nourished through struggle, and worldviewism can seem to promise a cheap shortcut to knowledge, it does not often create students fired with a love for truth.

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1. David K. Naugle, *Worldview: The History of a Concept* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 58-59.





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WORTH SALVAGING?

To be sure, many of the savvier proponents of “Christian worldview thinking” are careful to try and make the needed qualifications to forestall these dangers. Al Wolters, for instance, in his fine book *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, goes out of his way to acknowledge that worldviews are not necessarily internally consistent, that they are often “half unconscious and unarticulated,” and that often material factors influence our actions nearly as much as intellectual factors; and he privileges the “map” metaphor over the “lens” metaphor.² He also notes in his conclusion “that a biblical worldview does not provide answers, or even a recipe for finding answers, to the majority of perplexing problems with which our culture con-

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2. Al Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 4-6.



fronts us today.”³ But one cannot help but feel as if he is often trying to lean hard against the natural implications or at least normal usage of the metaphor he has chosen to adopt. Given the frequent abuse of the concept by cookie-cutter intellectual culture-warriors, it is worth asking whether it’s really worth salvaging.

CALVIN’S “LENS”

Some might also point out that the “worldview” metaphor has a venerable pedigree in a famous passage from John Calvin. He writes in his *Institutes*, “Just as old or bleary-eyed men and those with weak vision, if you thrust be-

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3. Wolters, 115.

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fore them a most beautiful volume, yet can scarcely construe two words, but with the aid of spectacles will begin to read distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God.”⁴

However, there are three key differences here from much modern “worldview” language. First, it is “knowledge of God” specifically that is being discussed, not knowledge of the world more generally. Calvin is clear elsewhere that our knowledge of the rest of the world is not nearly so blurred by sin as our knowledge of God himself. Second, the “spectacles” are Scripture itself, not some all-encompassing conceptual system derived from them. Third, the idea is that there is either blurred vision (without spectacles) or accurate vision (with the spectacles of Scripture). But some modern worldview language seems to speak as if there are lots of different sets of spectacles (perhaps with different colored lenses) and ours just happens to be the “right one,” for reasons often as much as aesthetic as rational.

Again, the point in all this is not that the “worldview” concept can never be usefully employed, but to ask whether it really does more good than harm; or, if it once did, has it now perhaps outlived its usefulness in many quarters?

What about Wisdom?

BUT IF WE ARE TO DISCARD IT, DO WE HAVE A
REPLACEMENT?

.....

4. Calvin, *Institutes* I.6.1 (McNeill ed., 1:70).



Not perhaps for every use to which “worldview” language has been put (and that is perhaps part of the problem; the wish for a catch-all term to apply in many different contexts), but when it comes to *viewing the world rightly*, we do have a good alternative: wisdom.

WHAT IS WISDOM?

“Wisdom,” unlike “worldview,” is all over the Bible itself. We are commanded to passionately pursue wisdom (Prov. 4:5, 7), told that “wisdom is better than jewels” (Prov. 8:11), that it is by wisdom that “kings reign, and rulers decree what is just” (Prov. 8:15), and that “whoever finds [wisdom] finds life” (Prov. 8:35). “Wisdom” is capable of broad and varied meanings. For instance, when we read of the transcendent wisdom of Solomon in 1 Kings 4, it is much more than wisdom in judicial judgment: “He also spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005. He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall. He spoke also of beasts, and of birds, and

of reptiles, and of fish” (1 Kgs 4:32–33). In Exodus 31, the craftsman Bezalel and Oholiab are spoken of as being “filled with wisdom” for their task of fashioning the Temple. In his excellent book *Law and Wisdom in the Bible*, David Daube identifies meanings of wisdom that range from “shrewdness” to “excellence in craftsmanship” to “moderation” to “life-and-death-dealing insight.”⁵

How might we draw these varied connotations together? I think we could define wisdom as “the soul’s attunement to the order of reality,” an attunement that is to some extent natural, and to a large extent handed down through the generations, but that can only be fully cultivated through long and close attention to the fine-grained reality that confronts us. Pay close attention to each of the points in this definition. Wisdom is objective, as one is either in tune with reality or not, even if the process of attunement is a life-long quest. Wisdom is to some extent innate (the “natural law” that Christian philosophers have long spoken of), but it is also, however, crucially a matter of teaching

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and learning, of receiving a wisdom handed down. Yet merely receiving some teaching does not constitute wisdom, as each knower must lay hold of it himself or herself by personal engagement with the order of reality.

Although wisdom does consist of principles, they are principles gleaned from experience and reflection, not prefabricated. Wisdom involves a unity of theoretical and practical reason (a unity so often broken in modernity): it is an intellectual knowledge and an understanding of how things relate, but it is no use if it is not also hands-on and tacit, consisting of and nourished by virtuous habits. And although the first principles of wisdom are taught in the Word of God, we should not think that wisdom is something

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5. Daube, *Law and Wisdom in the Bible: David Daube’s Gifford Lectures*, edited and compiled by Calum Carmichael (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2010), 3–4.



HENRI DE VULCOP, LADY PHILOSOPHY PRESENTING THE SEVEN LIBERAL ARTS TO BOETHIUS

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that you simply have or don't have, like the right worldview; in this life, it is always incomplete, and those that have the most of it know best how much more they need to gain. The fear of the Lord is indeed central to wisdom, but wisdom is not a self-contained system unique to Christians, but an attunement to a shared reality, a reality that unbelievers are sometimes considerably more attentive to than we are.

A STORY-FORMED WISDOM

But we must speak of more than just this general wisdom focused on the structure of the world, if we are to suitably replace the “worldview” concept. Let us speak of a “story-formed

wisdom,” for Scripture calls us to remember, internalize, and be formed by the story of God’s acts in this world, and to live in light of the destiny of our

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world which He reveals to us. By knowing the narrative of God’s saving acts in history, the Christian is equipped with a privileged understanding of the nature of things, and the ends of things, and most importantly, with the virtues of faith, hope, and love that elevate Christian wisdom—crowning it, in the most mature saints, with piercing insight and indomitable confidence. But if we do not first have wisdom in the sense of an attunement to our shared reality, then we

can hardly expect that merely being made privy to more insights about that reality, as Christians are, will suddenly enable us to navigate the world with poise and grace.

In short, there are no shortcuts. Wisdom takes work. So we had better get busy.





WHAT ARE “DAVENANT DIGESTS?”

Davenant Digests seek to bring the church's past into clear focus for Christians today, and use it to shed light on the challenges of the church's present. Written in a clear, lively, and down-to-earth style, these short introductions aim to answer questions that ordinary Christians have, in terms that ordinary Christians will want to read.



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