

[*MJTM* 15 (2013–2014) 79–99]

DISTINGUISHING A CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW
AND SUPPOSED CULTURAL ABSOLUTES

Stanley E. Porter*
McMaster Divinity College, Hamilton, ON, Canada

I am pleased to deliver this lecture¹ on the topic of distinguishing a Christian worldview and supposed cultural absolutes. I was recently awarded the Roy A. Hope Chair in Christian Worldview at McMaster Divinity College. Roy Hope was a generous man who wanted to ensure that Christians were aware of what it meant to have a Christian worldview, so he provided that, after his death, this would be accomplished by means of McMaster Divinity College integrating worldview studies into their programs and courses. We also established a chair that is focused upon this particular issue. I had an interest in what it means to form and hold a Christian worldview long before I took this chair, however. A number of years ago, I co-edited a book on Christian worldview. This book grew directly out of worldview studies at Trinity Western University in Langley, British Columbia.² Every student at this Christian university is required to participate in a course in Christian worldview studies, during which professors from the various academic areas of the university offer lectures to the students showing how their particular academic discipline can be integrated with a Christian worldview. Not only did I co-edit this book, but I contributed the

* Stanley Porter is President and Dean, Professor of New Testament, and holder of the Roy A. Hope Chair in Christian Worldview at McMaster Divinity College.

1. This is a slightly revised form of a lecture delivered at North Toronto Chinese Baptist Church on 8 October 2013 to inaugurate the Graduate Certificate Program in Christian Worldview of McMaster Divinity College, Hamilton, Ontario.

2. Downey and Porter, eds., *Christian Worldview*.

chapter on Christian worldview and biblical studies. This book is used, I believe, as a textbook in worldview studies at a number of institutions in Canada.

Some may be surprised to hear that we needed a lecture on Christian worldview and biblical studies—at no less a place than Trinity Western University. Some no doubt think that a subject such as biblical studies would inherently have a Christian worldview, or that a place such as Trinity Western would not require such a lecture. This unfortunately is not the case, because of the nature of what it means to have a Christian worldview. That is the topic of this presentation—what it means to have an explicit Christian worldview, especially in relation to expected cultural absolutes.

Preliminary Comments

Every human being has a worldview, that is, a view of the world around them and how they relate to it. This view may be based upon raw materialism, or the seeking after pleasure, or a work ethic, or something similar, but everyone has a worldview. I am sure that we all know a variety of people who have a wide range of worldviews. These are often evidenced in what people value most—whether it is money, or fame, or satisfaction, or whatever. Most people, however, do not have an explicit worldview. In other words, most people have not gone to the trouble of thinking about the worldview they have, and attempting to articulate what exactly they value most, how they think of themselves in relation to the world around them, and what they even think about themselves. Most people probably have what I could characterize as an uncritical or unreflective worldview. However, they still have a worldview.

The sources of our worldview are many and varied. Our worldview begins to be formed early on in our families and our early living situations, and continues to develop throughout the course of our lives. These sources of our worldview include such things as: the beliefs, actions, and ideas of our parents; the beliefs, actions, and ideas of our friends and other close associates; and the values of our immediate and more distant cultures. Our

culture provides a range of influences on our worldview by means of various views of money, security, education, satisfaction, pleasure, work, recreation, and the like. Our worldview is also formed by what we believe about what we cannot see. In other words, our worldview is a direct result of our ontology or what we believe has ultimate substance, such as whether there is or is not a God or some other higher power or being. We are also influenced by how we think that we know and experience these various things in the world around us, or what is called our epistemology, whether we believe that we know only through what we experience through our senses or whether we know through other avenues.

Thinking about Our Worldview

I have developed a series of questions that I hope will prompt thinking about some of the things that I have already raised as issues, and that are designed to elicit more particular and focused thought about our own worldviews.

1. Do you believe in a personal god, an impersonal god, don't know whether there is a god, or know for sure that there is no god?
2. How do you gain knowledge of the world around you? Through the Bible, experience, culture, your senses, or directly from phenomena around you?
3. How do you test an idea for its validity?
4. How do you judge whether an action is right or wrong?
5. Is planning or spontaneity a virtue?
6. Do you think that the individual is more important than the group, or the reverse?

7. Why is conformity more important than diversity, or is it?
8. Is education valuable because it provides a job, or because it provides knowledge, or for some other reason?
9. Why is drinking of alcoholic beverages wrong, or is it?
10. Why is smoking wrong, or is it?
11. Why do the things that happen to you happen?
12. What one belief do you hold to that you know is wrong? (You must have at least one that is wrong, or are you claiming that you are perfect?) Are you willing to change it?

I will not spend the time at this point going through all of these questions, but I provide them as a means of generating thought about our worldviews, as I speak more about what it means to have and to hold a Christian worldview.

Formulating a Christian Worldview

A worldview, therefore—even if we are not fully cognizant of it—is a highly complex intellectual construct—one of the blessings and curses of what it means to be a reflective human being. As reflective human beings, we overtly or unintentionally engage with and think about the world around us, ourselves and others, and the unknown—and through that process we intentionally or unintentionally formulate a worldview.

From what I have said, we can appreciate that everyone has views about the various elements that I have mentioned above, and therefore everyone has a worldview. However, formulating an explicit worldview is a difficult task, because it requires that we think about—and ideally integrate—a large number of varied and not always discrete factors. In fact, most people, because they do not think explicitly about such things as their worldview,

probably hold to worldviews that are in some ways contradictory. For example, a person might claim that they believe in a God, but on the other hand they believe that all that they know or can trust is derived through their senses, what they can touch, or feel, or taste, or see. Having a contradictory worldview can often get people into trouble. For example—and here is a very common problem—young people often believe that they are invulnerable or that the laws of nature do not apply to them because they have come to believe in our contemporary society that they have a certain entitlement to life. However, if they engage in foolish behavior, such as driving too fast or driving after they have had too much alcohol to drink, they may challenge this belief that they are invulnerable—and lose.

The remedy to such a situation is that, rather than simply acknowledging that we all have a worldview, we should seek to have an informed and integrated and consistent worldview. I would go one step further and claim that Christians should have an integrated Christian worldview. What does this mean? I want to emphasize that a Christian worldview requires that we draw upon the best available sources of knowledge of a worldview, and integrate them into an internally and externally consistent and coherent approach to life, one that is livable in the day to day routine of life.

In light of the complexity of formulating a Christian worldview, I wish to identify and speak briefly about two major components of a Christian worldview. The first is the sources of our Christian worldview, and the second is the various levels or strata of our worldview. I will briefly treat each of these.

Sources of a Christian Worldview

The first is the source of our beliefs regarding a Christian worldview. There are four major sources of our worldview: the Bible, Christian history and tradition, reason, and experience.

1. The first is the Bible. I strongly believe that for a fully integrated Christian worldview, the Bible must have the central place. This means that we believe that the Bible is God's primary source of revelation to humanity—even if he has chosen to reveal himself through other means as well, such as nature or

personal witness or testimony (I do not mean to in any way denigrate these things, but do subordinate them to the Bible). This means that God has chosen to reveal himself in the Bible in a unique and special way so that humanity could have communication from God that gives to humanity what God believes is essential to human beings to know about himself, about themselves, and about the world around them.

This presentation is not meant to be a treatise in biblical interpretation, so I will resist going into further discussion of the Bible, except to say that one of the major problems in developing a Christian worldview is the tendency to read our own culture into the Bible. Thus, in the history of biblical interpretation, we all too often have seen instances where contemporary cultural absolutes or norms are seen to be biblically justified. To take just one example, Rom 13:1–7 has long been taken as a call to absolute obedience to the government. I know many people, even in our contemporary world, who have argued against taking an overt stand against their government of the time, because Paul has purportedly said that we are to give unqualified obedience to the governing authorities. This raises a number of obvious problems, especially when governments pass laws that are unjust or require that their citizens do things that the citizens consider immoral. However, I believe that this interpretation of Romans 13:1–7 is incorrect,³ and that the opening verse does not say that we are to be obedient to the positionally or hierarchically superior authorities, but that we are to be obedient to the qualitatively or morally superior authorities. This changes everything, but it makes good sense. Paul is not telling Christians to be obedient at all costs, but that they are to be obedient when the government is promoting goodness and justice. When it is not standing for these virtues, then Christians do not have an obligation to be obedient to that authority. However, Paul does not tell us how to determine when the authorities are being unjust. That requires our well-tuned Christian moral judgment.

I believe that this touches upon another area where there is confusion over what the Bible is supposedly saying or not. In

3. As I have argued in Porter, “Romans 13:1–7.”

Romans 13, I believe Paul is saying that each individual Christian must make up his or her mind for him- or herself regarding obedience to the state. The easy way out is simply to be obedient to the state, and then blame the government for all that goes wrong. It is much more difficult to recognize that we have individual responsibility. Thus, the second area where there is confusion regarding what the Bible purportedly teaches is regarding the individual and the corporate. I have just said that Paul argues in Romans 13 that we as individuals have the responsibility of determining when the government is in the wrong and, if it is, we have a moral obligation to disobey it. There is the mistaken notion that the Bible is all about a sense of corporateness and does not have a role for the individual—and this mentality has, I fear, been transferred into a number of even contemporary churches. There is no doubt a corporateness to much of what is depicted with God's people in the Bible—first the nation of Israel and then the church. We do not want to overlook these elements, in which the emphasis is upon the group providing necessary and important structures of support and care for the individuals within it. These corporate elements are very important. However, these corporate elements are never meant to replace the role of the individual. Whereas we may worship together in a corporate setting, and it is appropriate and right that we gather together regularly in such corporate settings, we come to Christ as individuals, one by one. Paul recognizes this when he talks about how it is that he himself struggles with his own will in Rom 7:7–25. I realize that there is much discussion of this passage, but I think that it is a passage that, whether you think Paul is speaking on behalf of someone else or himself, characterizes the person who is found within such a situation—the individual who confronts a desire to do other than God's will.

2. The second source of a Christian worldview is Christian history and tradition. Christianity has a long and noteworthy history and tradition that stretches back in an unbroken line to the first followers of Jesus. Some of these first followers were those who, under inspiration, wrote the Bible, but then took the Christian message to other places throughout the world. As the Chris-

tian message spread, the Christian church engaged in a constant dialogue with itself and its surrounding culture regarding what it means to be a faithful person in the face of opposition and adversity. From the earliest accounts in the book of Acts, I think that we can see the early church struggling with the issue of how we preserve the essence of the gospel as we adapt to the changing culture around us.

There are several major issues regarding Christian history and tradition that I would like to mention because of the role that they play in formulating a Christian worldview.

The first is the early church councils and creeds. There has been a revival of interest of late in the early creeds, such as the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed. There is much value in knowing and studying these creeds, as they are relatively early Christian synthetic reflections upon theological controversies in the early church or reflections of how the church chose to formulate in a compact form its essential beliefs. We can gain insights for our own time by examining how Christians thought through these issues and then formulated their own statements as a reflection of their beliefs. However, we need also to realize that most of these statements grew out of major and divisive theological controversies. These were controversies often related to the nature of Christ and his relationship to God. The resolution of some of these controversies was of course important in the history and development of the early church, but we must also recognize that these formulations came out of specific contexts, and that these contexts must be realized in order to fully understand the creedal statements. A further realization is that these creedal statements often did not end the controversy to which they were addressed. Sometimes these creedal statements represented a step along the way in arriving at a resolution, and they themselves were not the final formulation that some would have wished. Thus, while being appreciative, we must recognize the limitations of the creeds in formulating a Christian worldview.

A second issue in Christian history and tradition is the institutionalization of Christianity. There are two major movements here that I wish to discuss that have an impact on formulating a Christian worldview. I have come to realize in recent study that

Jesus was involved in a more complex ministry than is often realized. Most people probably believe that Jesus gathered around him a group of twelve men, and this was the basis of the early church. There is of course truth in the fact that Jesus chose twelve followers and that they were men. However, the stratification of Jesus' working relationships is, I believe, more complex than that. I believe that Jesus' closest group of followers consisted of family, especially his mother Mary, probably his brothers, and a number of close women associates, a group that came to include Mary Magdalene, Salome, and others. This was the first group of his closest followers, and the ones primarily responsible for supporting his ministry. Jesus then appointed twelve disciples or followers that he would take under his wing to teach. These have the characteristics of disciples of other teachers of the day, in that they followed him and paid close attention to what he said and did, and were probably in large part responsible for passing on the testimony concerning him that eventually became our written Gospels. There were also several other layers of social stratification surrounding the early Jesus movement. These include a next level of followers, such as the 72 who went out on the missionary venture. Then there were the crowds who listened to him, which ranged in size up to the huge crowd that heard the Sermon on the Mount. Finally there were Jesus' opponents, who always hovered around the outside of his group. I go into this detail to say that I believe that in the history of the church the first group has been overlooked and lost sight of. In other words, it was overlooked in the second and third centuries that Jesus' closest and first group of ministry partners was made up of family members and women. Instead, the emphasis was placed upon the disciples, who were all males. This led to the fixation upon maleness within the church to the point where the offices and functions of the church were thought to be exclusively male in many if not most circles. This is an instance where the later church tradition has not served us well in helping to formulate a Christian worldview but has instead reinforced inappropriate cultural absolutes regarding gender roles within the church.

This situation was made more formalized and intransigent by the conversion of Constantine in the fourth century and the formalization of Christianity as a state religion. I have no doubt that Constantine came to genuine faith, and that he had noble and good intentions when he decided to make Christianity a legalized religion within the Roman Empire. This was, at least according to his mind, to be preferred over the kinds of persecution that the church had suffered in other periods. However, this institutionalization, I believe, created a radical transformation of the Christian church from which we have never fully recovered. Of course, we all appreciate that, at least in the West, as a result, persecution became greatly reduced. But something fundamental was lost as well. Christianity, I believe, was never meant to be a dominant socio-cultural force. Prior to Constantine, Christians had been on the outside, the embattled minority, who had to be clear on the reasons for their faith. This all changed with Constantine, so that it became politically and socially and culturally beneficial to become a Christian. This meant that Christian values and societal values became mixed and confused, so that when the societal values changed, it caused problems with Christian values, as they are associated with each other. One of these areas is the issue of abortion within Canadian society. When Canada was considered a “Christian” country—whatever that meant, and I won’t go into that here—we could all agree that abortion should not be practiced. But then society changed, and now Christians are caught not knowing how to respond to the issue of abortion—even Christians within government are caught on the horns of this dilemma, wanting to retain power because they believe they can do a greater good, while sacrificing thousands of lives in the process.

3. The third source of a Christian worldview is reason. Reason is, of course, an indispensable part of formulating a Christian worldview. As I mentioned earlier, everyone has a worldview, but many do not know what their worldview is and many would find—if they were to analyze it in more detail—that theirs contains numerous contradictions. I can offer one obvious example. There are many who hold to a worldview that endorses pleasure as a primary goal of life. They may not state it that explicitly, but

they live their lives that way, engaging in all sorts of pleasurable activities, many of them to excess, to ensure that they get maximal pleasure. Many of these people may also hold to other values within their worldview, such as wealth, or good health. What they have not perhaps fully thought through is that to engage in the fulfillment of pleasure may mean that they will have less wealth or not as good health. I am less concerned to find the exact balance among these elements than to say that reason needs to be a part of formulating one's worldview, and especially a Christian worldview.

Christians have some of the same issues with the use of reason in their worldview. I will use an example that I must confess is perhaps particular to me, but that I think is, nevertheless, worth contemplating. Many Christians here in Ontario believe that they should support various Christian ministries through their financial contributions. They believe that they should give to their local church and that they should support other ministries as well. I think that Christian charity is a good thing. However, I recently read that apparently the typical Canadian only gives on average \$300 a year to charity. Religiously active people give more—about \$1,000 per year. To be honest with you, while I am pleased to see that religiously active people give more than those who are not active, \$1000 is not very much when you consider the financial needs of ministries. Many probably believe or even overtly state that they wish that they could give more. The fact of the matter is that many Canadians in Ontario, including a good number of Christians, also own and maintain cottages that they flee to every summer. I have not done a scientific study, but a number of years ago I read that very few cottages actually earn their owners any money, but instead are at best break-even ventures, with many of them being financial drains. How many of these Christians have examined the rationality of maintaining their cottages at a loss, when there are ministries that require their money? In this case, I think that there is a larger worldview proposition regarding my entitlement to rest or wanting to keep up with the Jones's or something like this that leads them into what I consider a glaring contradiction.

4. The fourth source of a Christian worldview is experience. We are all sentient human beings so we participate in a variety of experiences every day. We get up in the morning and go to work or school and then interact with various people before we come home, and then do things around the house or go out again for an important meeting, before we retire for the night. Our lives are full of experiences. These experiences inevitably have an impact upon our lives—consciously or unconsciously. All of these experiences become a part of who we are and have an influence upon how we think of the world around us, that is, they have an impact upon our worldview. Experiences in and of themselves are usually not good or bad, except as we reflect upon, respond to, or act upon them in the course of our lives, and they influence our actions or beliefs. Sometimes these ways are appropriate and sometimes they are not.

One of the areas where we are perhaps most vulnerable is in relation to our own church experiences. These experiences can be many and varied. They include such things as the type of building that is appropriate for us to worship in, who leads our services of worship, what the composition of such a worship service entails, how the various components of this service are conducted (for example, do you feel compelled to stand up every time you sing, or can you stay seated sometimes?), how often you participate in communion, who can lead communion, the role of ordained and non-ordained clergy in your church. I could continue for quite some time. For those of us who have spent our lives in the Christian church, it is hard to get away from equating what goes on in church with what it must mean to have a Christian worldview. In other words, what happens at church is the way that these things should happen.

I am not ordained with any church, insofar as I hold formal ordination papers that credential me in a particular denomination. I however am actively engaged in ministry and in fact am the president of a Christian theological seminary—which itself constitutes a type of formal call to ministry. I am intentionally not ordained with any church in the traditional way for a simple reason—I do not believe that ordination as it has become used within the Christian church is either necessary or desirable—and

probably not even biblically justifiable. I have come to this conclusion as a result of weighing both what the Bible says on such matters—and in fact the Bible says little to nothing about the idea of ordination as we traditionally practice it in the church—and on the basis of my Christian experience. My Christian experience is that I have been in churches where we did not have formally ordained clergy, and in those churches we all took a more active role in the work of ministry, because we knew that if we did not do these tasks, then the tasks would not get done. However, once we brought in an “ordained” pastor we all knew that we had hired someone to take care of all of these responsibilities, and so we needed to do less. I found in my own experience that ordination was a hindrance to ministry rather than a help. My view is that there are people who are “ordained” to particular tasks within the church (as I am recognized to function as President of McMaster Divinity College), as witnessed by the laying on of hands, and that when those tasks are accomplished then they are no longer “ordained” to that task. I will continue in my task as President of the College as long as the College wishes me to do so, but then I will no longer be “ordained” for that task. Our Christian experience usually tells us that to be a church we must have an “ordained” pastor, but is that correct? I doubt it. In fact, having ordination as we do in churches today may not even be biblical in the sense of prescribed by the Bible.

The Strata of a Christian Worldview

Formulating a consistent and integral Christian worldview can be a lot of hard work, there is no doubt about that. The difficulties are caused by the amount of data and categories that one must integrate, and how they function in relation to each other. As a result, let me suggest that the best way to think about a Christian worldview is in terms of four levels or strata. These proceed from the most fundamental to the most practical elements of a Christian worldview.

1. The first stratum of a Christian worldview is what one believes about ultimate reality. When all is said and done, what do you think is the ground of being? This is the question of on-

tology or metaphysics. In other words, if someone were to ask you what would be the final determinative factor for grounding your worldview, what would this be? This is the most important stratum of the Christian worldview, as it has an influence upon every other element.

For Christians, the fundamental ground of their worldview is the fact that there is a God, and that this God chose to reveal himself in the incarnate Jesus Christ, and that this incarnate Jesus Christ lived for a short time with us before dying and being resurrected. I could say more, but you can see that this constitutes a fundamental element of a Christian worldview. At the end of the day, a Christian must be content that their worldview is consistent with God and that anything that they believe or do is consistent with his character and what he has revealed through his Bible, his Son Jesus Christ, and his continuing presence by means of the Holy Spirit. If there is some area of one's worldview that is out of harmony with this, then I think that one needs to take note, because that person probably does not have a consistent—to say nothing of a genuinely Christian—worldview. For example, if a person is engaging in certain activities that are inconsistent with the character of God—such as committing certain acts that are clearly proscribed by God—then one has an inconsistent Christian worldview.

Let me make clear, however, that there are many other possible (or at least purported) ontological bases for worldviews, and some of them are functionally, if not conceptually, held by Christians.

In contemporary society, materialism is probably as important or widespread a basis of a worldview as exists—even among Christians. Materialism is diametrically opposed to the Christian worldview. The God of the Bible and of Christianity is spirit and calls for spiritual connection and values, that is, connections and values that transcend and go beyond materialism. Materialism states that all that there is in the world is material substance. This material substance may take various forms, but when all is said and done it is still simply materialism, with the attendant values that people give to this materialism. Since I have stated this opposition rather boldly, some may wonder how it is that Chris-

tians could have functionally materialist worldviews. This is quite simple. I have heard, as an example, of a Christian businessman who states that he goes to church on Sunday but that he conducts his business Monday to Saturday as would any other businessman—with the goal of making as much money as he can. In other words, whereas God is given one day of the week, the rest of the days of the week are given to the accumulation of material things. This reveals that this person essentially believes that what is important in life—what has lasting value for him and is worth investing most of his time in—is materialism. This is an inconsistent Christian worldview.

Another candidate for a competing worldview is pleasure. Pleasure as a basis of a worldview takes a number of different forms. Of course, there is the kind of rampant hedonism that we associate with those whose lives are out of control, seeking pleasure in abuses of various types, whether it is substance abuse, sexuality, or the like. Most of those who maintain pleasure as the fundamental value in their worldview are not as obvious or as potentially destructive as this. But the pleasure principle is obvious nonetheless, when they structure their lives around the avoidance of anything unpleasant or painful and surround themselves with things that give them pleasure—whether that is automobiles, other people, food, comfort items, computers, phones, music, and the list can go on endlessly. For these people, despite what they may or may not say, fundamentally what gives them security and provides the basis of their lives is pleasure, and they will go to whatever lengths necessary to ensure that they have this pleasure. This too is the basis of an inconsistent Christian worldview.

There are other bases of worldviews as well. In fact, almost anything can become the basis of a worldview if it is the thing or person that someone focuses upon as the center of their existence. When all else is stripped away, this is the thing that they turn to for their meaning in life.

It is important, therefore, that we get our fundamentals in place for a Christian worldview. These fundamentals must include the personal God who has revealed himself to us, and to whom we stand accountable, not only on Sundays, but every day

and hour and minute of our lives—when we think we are being watched and when we think we are alone.

2. The second stratum of the Christian worldview is how it is that we access this Christian worldview. Once we have our fundamentals in place, we must also determine how we are going to determine what this worldview entails. This is the question of epistemology—how we know what we know. Christians are greatly aided in this, because our access to God involves two-way communication between God and humanity. God in fact has taken the initiating step and chosen to reveal himself to us as humans. As I mentioned above, he has chosen to do this by means of revealing himself directly, through the incarnation of his Son Jesus Christ, through his indwelling and abiding presence of the Holy Spirit, through his revealed word, and through nature. There is an abundance of ways that God has chosen to reveal himself to us. God has also made us, as human beings, capable of receiving this revelation and responding to it, so that our communication is reciprocal. We are able to respond to God through our thoughts, our prayers, our expressions of creativity, our emotions, and our actions. Rather than there simply being a static set of directives from God, this creates a dynamic dialogue, in which God communicates with us and we respond appropriately to him. As a result, we must be open to God's communication through not only one or a limited number of media, but through multiple media. I will not pretend that this is always or even ever easy, and we are probably all familiar with instances in which people have claimed to know what God is saying when they in fact clearly do not. This requires discernment and the exercise of our rational and other faculties, but it allows us to be in communication with God.

As with questions of essential substance, which we discussed first, there are also other competing models of how we know what we should know about a Christian worldview. The most widely recognized means of knowing is empiricism. Empiricism says that we know what we know through our senses, our sense of taste, touch, smell, hearing, and sight. There is a longstanding philosophical tradition in the Western world that places empiricism at the heart of what it means to know about the world

around us. Empiricism has provided the basis of a number of different approaches to knowledge, from raw empiricism that says that all that we can know is given to us from our senses, to a combination of empiricism with other types of knowing, such as the knowledge of self-evident truths (such as $2 + 2 = 4$). The problem is that our senses can mislead us. In fact, our senses often mislead us. We hear something and act on it, only to find out later that we didn't hear what we thought we did. More importantly than that, however, is the fact that empiricism only accesses the world around us, the material world, not the spiritual world, the world with which we need to be connected in order to be truly human and Christian.

On the opposite side from empiricists are those whose insights into reality come from some kind of inner feeling or emotion. The empiricist claims only to trust the senses, whereas there are others who only trust their inner feelings. They believe that they cannot trust anything except what their deepest feelings tell them. If they feel uncomfortable about something, then they will not act on it, even if they have no other indication that they should or should not. Most people probably are functional empiricists—that is, they act on what their senses tell them—but there are a number of people who act on the basis of their feelings or emotions—and we all probably at one time or another react to our feelings or emotion. Such people believe that they have some kind of knowledge that is mediated to them through their feeling process. The major problem here is that it is very difficult to test our inner feelings or emotions. As human beings, we are emotional and feeling beings, and these emotions and feelings need to be recognized and embraced as an essential part of what it means to be human. However, they are not necessarily a way to reliable knowledge of God. We all know instances when we had a particular set of feelings or someone told us that they simply “knew” that they were supposed to do something, where there was no way to engage in critical discernment because such feelings or emotions cannot be shared or examined by others—and they have proved to be wrong.

3. The third stratum of a Christian worldview is practical beliefs. Practical beliefs are the kinds of beliefs that we hold to

that are put in place on the basis of our fundamental beliefs and how we arrive at this knowledge. Practical beliefs are generally good things if they are grounded in a Christian worldview in the other two strata that we have already discussed. If they are not formulated around our essential beliefs and knowledge, they can be quite harmful, because they will then be grounded on the basis of elements of a competing worldview.

4. The fourth stratum of a Christian worldview is practical behavior. Practical behavior is the outgrowth of the kinds of practical beliefs that we have. Practical behavior should be grounded in our practical beliefs, and our practical beliefs in our fundamental beliefs.

I treat the two, practical beliefs and behavior, together because they are closely related, but they can often become skewed and problematic.

For example, a reasonable practical belief, widely held even among Christians, is that one should be responsible for one's family and prepare for the future. This may seem like a reasonable practical belief, but I wonder how this relates to the more fundamental belief that God is the one who provides. The notion that God helps those who help themselves is not found in the Bible, but comes from the American Benjamin Franklin. I would contend that this is a clear instance where a cultural absolute has been confused with a tenet of a Christian worldview.

I was once invited to speak to the Board of Trustees of a well-known Christian college. The Board members were sincerely interested in their institution and how they could support it and its mission. In the course of our discussion together, I asked how many of the Board members had actually sent their own children to the college, and only one or two raised their hands. In other words, only a couple of those who supported the college and wished for others to support it were willing to make the decision to send their own children. Only a few were willing or able to bring their fundamental beliefs and even practical beliefs into harmony with their practical behavior. I believe that these parents have an inconsistent Christian worldview, in which their practical beliefs and their practical behavior are in conflict. I suspect that many of us have similar conflicts.

All of these Board members had no doubt many good reasons for sending their children to provincial universities instead. The reasons sound good in the abstract—because some of the values seem to be good ones—but perhaps they are not such good reasons after all. A number of Christian parents these days send their children to provincial universities so that (supposedly) these children can get jobs when they graduate. Those parents are telling me that materialism is probably their most important belief. Other parents send their children to provincial universities so they can major in engineering or computer science or business—so that they will not just get jobs but get jobs that provide economic security when they graduate. These parents are telling me several things. They are telling me not only that they are materialists, but that they are pragmatists. They believe that attending university is not about genuine education—that is, educating the mind so that the person can be a better informed and disciplined thinker—but about ensuring a particular kind of future security. I believe that this reveals an inconsistent Christian worldview that has fallen victim to the cultural absolutes of our day and age—that security, materialism, and pragmatism are the most abiding values.

Another reasonable practical belief is that one should provide means for encouraging and helping one's children to build up their faith through the course of their life. However, I have noticed within a number of Christian families that these practical beliefs and their practical behavior often come into conflict.

One of the concerns that all Christian parents have is that their children should grow up to accept Jesus Christ personally as their Savior. This is an important practical belief and results in all kinds of practical behavior, such as taking children to church, conducting Bible studies with them, and the like. However, what if I were to note that there are two behaviors that perhaps have a more important influence on whether the children of Christian parents remain faithful to their Christian roots than any other? If you perform one of the behaviors the children will stay faithful but if you do the other they will not. Would you not wish to participate in that?

Dr. John Patrick (in personal conversation) has told me that the statistics indicate that 80 percent of children who attend secular provincial universities will have their faith seriously, adversely affected, whereas 80 percent of children who attend a Christian university or college will remain true to their faith. I hope that these statistics are clear. I will repeat them in another way. If parents send their child to a provincial university, 4 out of 5 of these children will graduate with their faith in some way majorly compromised, whereas if parents send their child to a Christian university or equivalent, 4 out of 5 will remain true to the faith.

If these are accurate statistics—and I have every reason to believe that they are (as I have read similar statistics from other places)—then why are Christian parents not sending their children to Christian colleges and universities by the droves? Why, indeed, are they not sending their children to those Christian colleges and universities? Parents who do not send their children to such Christian institutions may be indicating that they have placed a cultural norm—pragmatism, employability, even materialism—ahead of other values such as reinforcing the faith of their children. I would argue that this may well indicate an inconsistent Christian worldview.

Conclusion

Everyone has a worldview. Not everyone has an integrated and consistent worldview that provides conceptual guidance for the way they live. Christians are no exception. Christians also have a worldview—although not all of their worldviews are well integrated or even consistent. This is because Christians have often failed to examine the various sources and strata of a worldview. These sources and strata are essential components of every worldview—and will be a part of it whether one wishes to think about it or not—so it can only be to our best benefit to think deeply and hard about them. Along the way, what I have tried to emphasize is that often what are mistaken for elements of our worldview are cultural values that we believe constitute the firm basis of a worldview, that is, we mistake them as absolutes,

when in fact they are nothing more than various standards that have been unreflectively adopted and incorporated into our worldview. I hope that, through examination of what it means to formulate a Christian worldview, I have provided challenges to think more deeply about both our Christian worldviews and how we can differentiate them from the cultural baggage that we all carry around with us. Sometimes the reason that this baggage seems so heavy is because it is baggage that we were never designed to carry.

Bibliography

Downey, Deane E. D., and Stanley E. Porter, eds. *Christian Worldview and the Academic Disciplines: Crossing the Academy*. McMaster Divinity College Press General Series. Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2009.

Porter, Stanley E. "Romans 13:1–7 as Pauline Political Rhetoric." *Filología Neotestamentaria* 3 (1990) 115–39.