

Principles for Understanding the Biblical Worldview

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What is the biblical worldview? How shall we go about understanding the basic concept of the nature of reality that is at the foundation of the biblical message?

It is tempting to use one's own worldview as the framework to understand and apply the message of Scripture. Such an approach determines what Scripture can and cannot say, for whatever its message, it must be congruent with our understanding of reality. We come with our own philosophies, concepts of truth, and definitions of worldviews and of key categories, and use them as the basis for sculpting our understanding of the biblical worldview. Thus, Scripture and the God of Scripture are clay in our hands. We are the potter, and God must conform to the mold of our worldview.

This usually takes place without us realizing that we are stuffing God's Word and God Himself into our box, and thus limiting them to the confines of our own understanding of the world. With such an approach, the Bible does not inform us. Rather our world informs the Bible. The philosophy of our age becomes the foundation for our acceptance and understanding of the Word of God rather than the Word of God being the foundation for our worldview.

If we are to receive the message of Scripture, we must begin with what the Bible says about itself, and we must also accept the definitions it gives. We must come to the Bible with humility as a learner rather than as a master to bring it under our control. There are basic biblical concepts,

principles, and definitions that are essential to Scripture's communication of its worldview.

Accept What the Bible Says About Itself

If we are to pursue an understanding of the biblical worldview, we must accept what the Bible says about itself. Attempting to force the Bible into a platonic or scholastic or Enlightenment or post-modern worldview and their attendant methods will force those worldviews upon Scripture rather than allowing Scripture to reveal itself.

Scripture is not a construction of the human mind, the result of folk literature transmitted over hundreds and thousands of years. Rather, "all Scripture is given by inspiration of God" (2 Tim. 3:16).¹ Scripture came by the will of God, not by the will of man (2 Pet. 1:21).

The Bible is a unique piece of literature. This is the Bible's basic self-understanding. If this claim is rejected, the biblical worldview cannot be understood.

Accept Scripture's Own Self-concept and Resultant Hermeneutical Principles

Since Scripture is God's Word, it is foundational to human thought. Only in the light of the biblical worldview is it possible to understand the world in which we live. Thus, hermeneutics appropriate for the study of Scripture do not come out of Neo-Platonism with its allegorical method, scholasticism with its Aristotelian empirical and rational epistemology, the Enlightenment with the historical-critical method, Kantianism with its turn to the human subject, Postmodernism with its reader-response theory, or any other autonomous philosophical system.

The worldview we choose will determine the hermeneutic, and thus the final understanding of the message of Scripture. If we wish to understand the biblical worldview, we must begin with hermeneutics informed by and consistent with scriptures self-declaration of its nature—the Word of God.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all scriptural references are from *The New King James Version* of the Bible.

ZINKE: BIBLICAL WORLD VIEW

Imposing alien philosophies and methodologies upon Scripture is tantamount to imposing our mold upon Scripture. As Ellen G. White says, it robs Scripture of its power to bring conversion.²

If we reject the Bible's self-claim, we reject what is at the heart of Scripture's self-understanding, and thus, what is central to the biblical worldview. In harmony with the Reformation, the Bible must be its own interpreter. It discloses itself to us under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Accept Scripture as Providing the Sole Foundation for Understanding God

Natural theologies begin with the contemporary view of the natural world and thus with the contemporary philosophy of the age. They claim God can be known in the natural world apart from His self-disclosure in Jesus Christ and the Bible. God is made to be consistent with the current view of reality. His nature can be determined as a projection of the nature of reality as understood by the age.

Some theologies assert that natural theology is justified by Scripture itself. Romans 1:18–23 is considered a key text justifying such an approach. This passage clearly says that there are some aspects of the nature of God that may be known through nature: His eternal power and deity. But those who use Romans 1:18–23 as justification for natural theology disregard a basic principle of hermeneutics. They miss its context—"For it (the gospel) is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes, . . . For in it the righteousness of God is revealed" (Romans 1:16, 17). Romans 1:18ff is not an apology for natural theology. In context, Paul differentiates the revelation of God's righteousness and saving power in the gospel with His deity and eternal power revealed in the natural world. The gospel reveals His personhood. The natural world reveals characteristics about Him.

Another key text used to support the use of natural theology as a foundation for knowledge of God is Psalm 19. Verses 1–6 speak of God's glory as seen in His created work. God is addressed as *El* which refers to God, generically. Verses 7–10, however, speak of God's glory as may be seen in His Word: His law, testimony, and statutes. In this passage God is

² Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1911), 474.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

addressed as *Yahweh*, which refers to God as personal. These passages used to justify natural theology make a distinction between knowing God generically in the natural world, and knowing Him personally, as revealed in His Word.

“In its human wisdom the world cannot know God. Its wise men gather an imperfect knowledge of God from His created works, and then in their foolishness they exalt nature and the laws of nature above nature’s God.”³

“Nature cannot teach the lesson of the great and marvelous love of God.”⁴ When the natural world is used as a foundation for our acceptance and understanding of God, we create a God who fits our own understanding of reality. We create a “god” in our image, rather than ourselves in “God’s” image. Nature by itself does not provide a second and independent epistemological path to the knowledge of God. Only in the light of Scripture is it possible to understand the works of God in the natural world. Nature by itself does not reveal a personal God of love. If God’s love is not understood, God is not known.

The question of natural theology is at the heart of the Reformation debate with scholastic theology. If nature is a foundational source of knowledge of God independent from the Bible, then there are two independent epistemologies. It becomes the task of the theologian to synthesize the two into our understanding of God. The Bible becomes diluted by whatever philosophy is used to understand the natural world. Therefore, the Reformation responded with *sola scriptura*. *Sola scriptura* does not rule out other ways of knowing God, but it grounds them in scripture. The Bible sheds light upon them so that we may also see God’s glory in the natural world. Scripture is the sole foundation.

Apart from Special Revelation, the picture of God in nature is confusing and unsatisfying. Accepting the God revealed in scripture is essential to understanding the Biblical worldview. “Only in the light of revelation can it [nature] be read a right.”⁵

³ *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, ed. Francis D. Nichol (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1957), 1068.

⁴ Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1958), 291.

⁵ Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1903), 134.

**Accept God as Revealed in Scripture Rather Than
Subjecting Him to a Theodicy**

Theodicy is generally defined as the justification or judgment of God, particularly regarding His love and justice in view of evil in the world. Some say that our judgment of God is based upon commonsense views of the world, widely held historical and scientific opinion, and plausible moral principles.

Theodicies are usually meant to be positive affirmations of God. But they assume that God is subject to a set of universal laws which govern the universe. They assume that we have independent access to these laws, and thus, that we can determine whether God abides by them. We can use our knowledge of the principles of the universe to determine how God matches up. We can determine whether God is just and good, because He can be judged by universally and autonomously available principles of the universe.

Who, then, is God? Whoever He is, He must conform to the laws of the universe. He must be judged by our concept of truth to which He Himself is subject. Theodicies turn the judgment upside down. They wrest judgment from God and place it under human control. God is on trial to see if He has acted wisely, lovingly, according to truth and justice. The *logos* is something *other* than the divine Son of God! It is the philosophy *du jour*. God Himself then becomes subject to our perception of the universe.

Scripture presents a completely different concept of God—a God who is above all, who is not qualified by what is observed in the natural world, who is not subject to our reason, imagination, or judgment. God presents Himself as one who is unsearchable: “‘My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,’ says the Lord, ‘for as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts’” (Isa. 55:8, 9).

“‘Who has directed the Spirit of the Lord, or as His counselor has taught Him? With whom did He take counsel, and who instructed Him, and taught Him in the path of justice? Who taught Him knowledge, and showed Him the way of understanding?’” (Isa. 40:13, 14). He is Himself “‘the way, the truth, and the life’” (John 14:6), and therefore not subject to “‘eternal principles’” of the universe.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

How can God be brought into judgment when there is nothing to which He can be compared? (Isa. 46:5; Job 11:7-9). When He is Himself the standard.

“Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become His counselor?’” (Rom. 11:33, 34).

The God of scripture is not subject to humanistic philosophies about the nature of the universe or our judgments regarding Him. Job said, Though He slay me, a righteous man, yet will I trust him! (Job 13:15). The Biblical worldview can only be understood when we accept its God as the sovereign of the universe.

Accept the Biblical Concept of the Nature of Truth

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it” (John 1:1-5).

In platonic thought the *logos* was the rational structure of the universe from which truth emanated. John addresses this concept head on. The *logos* is not the rational structure of the universe; it is a person, Jesus Christ. What is more, the *logos* did what no Greek *logos* would do. He became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14). The Way, the Truth and the Life became one with us.

In the context of His role in the creation of the universe and the declaration that He is the *logos*, Christ is the light of the world. Scripture also points to God’s Word as “a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Ps. 119:105). “The entrance of Your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple” (vs. 130).

The *logos* is the light of the world. Without it, humanity is in darkness. Have you ever had the experience of entering a cave? After going 1 kilometer the lights are turned out. Absolutely nothing is visible—not even your hand in front of your face. The lights are then turned on, and you can see what was there all the time.

Christ is the light of the world. Because of His revelation, it is possible to see. This does not take away the need for us to use our eyes. But the

ZINKE: BIBLICAL WORLD VIEW

revelation of Jesus Christ makes it possible for us to see when we open our eyes. The light shining from God's Word makes possible the use of reason, senses, emotions, and all other human faculties. The Greek *logos* is not the key to the universe. It is Jesus Christ! If the Biblical concept of truth is rejected, another concept foreign to Scripture will be forced upon it. The Biblical worldview will be compromised.

Accept the Biblical Definition of the Nature of Faith

Humanistic faith begins with doubt. It attempts to prove or disprove the Bible and the God of the Bible worthy of faith. The foundation for faith is the evidence of the senses, reason, or emotions. Humanistic faith is a human creation.

Biblical faith by contrast is a gift from God (Eph. 2:8). It is not a human creation. It rests not on the wisdom of mankind but on the power of God (1 Cor. 2:4, 5). It is itself "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1).

Humanistic faith operates by human genius. It relies on the power of the human mind. Whereas, with Biblical faith, we walk "by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7). "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17).

In biblical faith, the Spirit and the Word work together. "No man can create faith. The Spirit operating upon and enlightening the human mind, creates faith in God."⁶

"Faith [is] the key of knowledge."⁷ It is the basis for discerning between truth and error.⁸ The assurance and evidence for faith is God's Word.⁹

Faith in the Word of God is not based upon humanistically derived knowledge; rather, faith itself is the foundation of knowledge. "By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God" (Heb. 11:3).

⁶ *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, ed. Francis D. Nichol (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1957), 940.

⁷ Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1940), 24.

⁸ Ellen W. White, *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1962), 501.

⁹ Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 2, (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1958), 243.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Paul contrasts three epistemologies—the philosophical system of the Greeks, the empiricism of the Jews, and the converting power of the Word of God. “For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, its pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For Jews request a *sign*, and Greeks seek after *wisdom*; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the *power of God* and the *wisdom of God*” (1 Cor. 1:21–24, emphasis supplied).

“My speech and my preaching were *not with persuasive words of human wisdom*, but in *demonstration of the Spirit and of power*, that your *faith* should not be in the *wisdom* of men but in the *power* of God” (2:4, 5, emphasis supplied).

These three systems of thought are illustrated in scripture. At the tree in the Garden, Eve could have answered the serpent with a thus says the Lord. Instead she rationalized that a God of love would not destroy a creature whom He has created. She also used empiricism—the serpent has eaten of the fruit and now speaks. Imagine what will happen to me if I perform the same experiment?

At Kadesh-barnea, ten spies choose to make their decision on the empirical interpretation of the data. No general in his right mind would take his people into such a slaughter. Two spies made their decision through the eyes of faith in the Word of God. The data did not change, but the understanding of its significance and of how to relate to it did.

The temptation of Christ in the wilderness took place immediately after the voice at the baptism, “This is my beloved Son” (Matthew 3:17) The temptation was to doubt the Word of God affirming His Sonship. Christ answered with “It is written” (Matthew 4:4).

Faith comes by acknowledging and accepting the power of the Word of God under the convicting power of the Holy Spirit. “The word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart” (Heb. 4:12). Conversion is not only of the heart, but also of the mind—not only to live in harmony with God, but to think in harmony with Him.

Nicodemus wanted to determine faith by humanistic means. Christ stated that he must be born again. Because of his worldview, this was

ZINKE: BIBLICAL WORLD VIEW

inconceivable to Nicodemus. So, he questioned, how is that possible? Christ answered by rebirth through the power of the Spirit (John 3:1-13).

God has given us our minds, feelings, and interpersonal relationships. All of these are important to who we are. God desires that we use our gifts and talents to the fullest, including our reason and our ability to observe. However, these talents are to be used in harmony with God's Word, rather than as an authority over it. Accepting the Biblical notion of faith is crucial to understanding the Biblical worldview. The role of God-given faith is central to the Biblical message.

Accept the Biblical Concept of Freedom

The humanistic concept of freedom is absolute autonomy. It is absolute independence from the dictates of the universe; from every human institution, from the state, from the church, and from the Bible and God Himself. It is freedom to determine the nature of truth and its manner of acquisition. Thus, acquisition of truth is independent of God and His Word.

On this basis, we no longer need God our father looking over our shoulder. We are free to determine our own truth, to decide how to live and how to relate to Christ if we wish to do so at all. We are free absolutely. Even the possibility of truth in the Bible must be determined on humanistic principles.

Most education is based upon a humanistic foundation. This foundation is so ingrained in the education system that most students simply assume its truth. The Bible is itself tested by philosophical and historical notions of truth. Whatever is accepted as truth within the Bible rests upon that humanistic foundation.

However, the Bible does not sanction autonomy. We are slaves either of sin or of God (Rom. 6:18-22). The biblical concept of freedom rejects the idea of absolute independence from God. The original sin of Lucifer was the desire to ascend into heaven and become like God. (Isaiah 14:12-14)

The humanistic perspective is that we are free to determine when and how we will come to Christ if we wish to do so at all. The biblical perspective is just the opposite. Christ sets us free when we come to Him. (John 8:36; Gal 5:1). The humanistic perspective is that we are free to determine our own platform for truth. The biblical perspective is that we shall know the truth and the truth shall set us free (John 8:32).

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

We cannot understand the biblical worldview without accepting its teaching on the nature of freedom. The Enlightenment view of freedom—or any other alien philosophical concept—leads away from understanding the biblical worldview.

Accept the Power of the Word of God

It is common to come to Scripture with power and authority derived from science, philosophy, history, psychology, sociology, linguistics, and so on. Such an approach to Scripture is required by the philosophies of our age. In so doing, we fail to recognize the power of the Word of God under the power of the Holy Spirit. Scripture becomes subject to the power of humanistic philosophies.

We think of conversion as the conversion of the heart, failing to recognize that it is also conversion of the mind, a willingness not only to live in harmony with God's Word, but to think in harmony with His Word.

God's Word brought worlds into existence, created life on earth, gave sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, and life to the dead. When we read God's Word, it is as if God Himself is present speaking to us. His Word can make its own way into the heart of the person who is open to it. Its power can bring transformation of life and mind.

“For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart” (Heb. 4:12 cf, Eph. 6:17 Heb. 1:3; 1 Peter 1:23).

Conclusion

We must come as a listener and learner if we wish to understand the biblical worldview. We must listen to what the Bible says about itself, God, the natural world, faith, truth, freedom—and we must yield to its emancipating power to transform our minds so that we can truly listen and follow His Word and understand its world view.

I used to envision myself as a doctor sitting at my desk in my office. I was surrounded by commentaries, lexicons, encyclopedias, and theologies from the church fathers to the present, histories of theology and so on. I would summon the Bible to come into my office so that I could diagnose its problems. I would carefully annotate its difficulties, check my diagnosis with my library and colleagues in various disciplines. I would come to my

ZINKE: BIBLICAL WORLD VIEW

conclusion and then carefully lift the Bible onto the table, delicately after all, because it is the Word of God. Then I would incise it, perform surgery on it, and then do my best to nurse it back to health.

But then I discovered that the Bible is not the patient. I am the patient. I must allow myself to be placed on the table. I must yield myself to the healing power of the Word of God. I must allow God to take away my propensity to preconceived philosophies and replace it with His view of the world. I must allow the Bible to renew my heart and mind. I must allow the Holy Spirit to bring conviction. I must allow the light of God's Word to shine on my thinking so that I can understand the world from God's perspective.

Open my mind, Lord, that I might understand the glories of Your Word.

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