

# ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

Dr. James P. Eckman, President  
Grace University, Omaha, Nebraska  
1-2 October 2011

## PERSPECTIVE NUMBER ONE

### *What is a Worldview?*

Christianity is not only a personal relationship with the living God through faith in Jesus Christ; it is a worldview. It is an entire way of thinking, covering not only theology, but how to think about ethics, history, science, literature, etc. Because God has revealed Himself verbally in the Bible, Christians have the answers to the most penetrating questions of life. James W. Sire suggests that there are seven such basic questions:

1. What is prime reality--the really real?
2. What is the nature of external reality, i.e., outside of ourselves?
3. What is a human being?
4. What happens to a person at death?
5. Why is it possible to know anything at all?
6. How do we know what is right and wrong?
7. What is the meaning of history?

Human beings must come to terms with these questions sometime during their lives. Sire argues that to discover one's worldview is a "significant step toward self-awareness, self-knowledge, and self-understanding." [James W. Sire. *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1988), pp. 17-18]

## PERSPECTIVE NUMBER TWO

### *Is Christianity a Genuine Worldview?*

By the phrase "genuine biblical Christianity," I mean the faith clearly revealed in God's Word, the Bible, and validated through human history. Using the above seven questions of James Sire, let's examine biblical Christianity as a worldview.

**1. God.** Biblical Christianity views God as He is revealed in the Bible and one of those central truths is the doctrine of the Trinity. It separates biblical Christianity from all other worldviews.

The Bible teaches in Deuteronomy 6:4 that God is one; yet from the New Testament it is clear that this one God consists of three persons--Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The church has always affirmed this doctrine as orthodox, but wrestling with its theological and philosophical implications has always been difficult. Especially in the early church, this struggle often produced heresy, and it continues to do so today (e.g., the Jehovah's Witnesses and

Mormonism). The ancient church of the 3rd and 4th centuries was plagued with false teaching that challenged the deity of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Whether it was the teachings of Arius (who denied Jesus' deity) or the Pneumatomachians, the Son and the Spirit were regarded as subordinate to the Father. In order to preserve the oneness of God, others argued that Jesus was a man who was adopted as the Son of God; thus He was not eternally the Son. Others contended there was one God who revealed Himself in one of three modes--Father, Son and Spirit. The critical question has always been, "what does Scripture teach?" More specifically, what precise, descriptive words will guard against heresy when it comes to the relationship between the Father, Son and Spirit? The biblical teaching on God as Trinity argues that we must always separate the terms essence and person; they are not synonyms. "Essence" is what makes God, God. Attributes such as omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience are involved here. "Person" is a term that defines the distinctions within that one essence. Thus we can correctly say "God the Father," "God the Son," and "God the Holy Spirit," while maintaining that they are one and inseparable in being. Yet, the difference between each can be grounded only in relational and functional differences. Any language that results in the Son's or Spirit's subordination to the Father is simply unacceptable.

Thus, definitionally the Trinity is one God of three persons whose difference is relational and functional, not essential. We do not have three gods or three modes of God; we have one God. Ephesians 1:1-14 illustrates this truth quite well--the Father chooses, the Son redeems, the Spirit seals (see also 2 Cor. 13:14; 1 Pet. 1:2). Each member of the Godhead is intimately involved in the drama of salvation. We thus can follow Paul and praise the Trinitarian God of grace. God is also revealed in Scripture as the Creator and Sustainer of all life. As prime reality, God creates *ex nihilo* and then sustains all that He creates (see Genesis 1 and 2 and Colossians 1:15-20). God is a God of truth (John 14:6) and His revelation (i.e., the written Word) is truth (John 17:17). He is a personal God who seeks intimacy and fellowship with His creatures (see the Psalms, 1 John and John 4). Therefore, atheism, pantheism or polytheism are not viable options for understanding God as the prime reality.

**2. Jesus.** Without question, the defining issue of biblical Christianity is Jesus Christ. Only a Jesus who is truly God and truly man can provide a complete salvation for humanity. He must be fully human to be our substitute and He must be fully God to be our perfect substitute. For that reason biblical Christianity has always taught that Jesus is both God and man--the Godman.

How do His deity and His humanity in one person relate to one another, for He is both God and man in one person? Both natures are joined in a miraculous way so that neither is damaged, diminished or impaired. He is, then, undiminished deity plus perfect humanity united in one person, without any confusion of the two natures. In that absolute sense, He is the Godman! Therefore, when describing Jesus, any choice of words that diminishes His deity or His humanity (e.g., Mormonism and Jehovah's Witnesses) is incorrect and heretical. Only words that preserve both His complete deity and humanity are acceptable. A complete salvation demands it; faith in the Godman, Jesus Christ, procures it.

**3. Salvation.** Biblical Christianity declares that humans are born sinners and inherit the guilt and corruption of Adam, for when Adam sinned, all sinned (Romans 5:12). Therefore, the fundamental problem of the human race is not political, social, economic or psychological; it is

spiritual. Following its articulation by the Apostle Paul in Romans and Galatians, the Bible defines the solution to the human problem of sin as the free-grace gospel of Jesus Christ. God's grace is thus absolutely essential for human salvation and that grace is magnified in Jesus. How does one appropriate God's grace in Jesus? It is only appropriated by faith in His finished work on Calvary's cross. Because God is just and holy, He demands payment for sin. Further, any human action or work to merit God's favor in salvation is inadequate--all human righteousness is as "filthy rags" (Isaiah 64:6). The situation, therefore, appears hopeless. Because of this hopeless human condition and because of His love, God sent the second Person of the Trinity to add to His deity humanity and die on the cross as our substitute (Isaiah 52:13--53:12 and John 3:16). God's just demands are thus met and we appropriate that finished work through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9). We therefore become His children by adoption into His family with all the rights, benefits and privileges intact (Galatians 4:1-7). For that reason, any worldview that adds something to faith contradicts biblical teaching. Every worldview covered in this book, whether the major world religions or the cults, declares that human works in some form are necessary to merit the favor of deity. God's Word is very clear that no human work can merit salvation. In terms of salvation, any teaching that adds to or substitutes for the finished work of Jesus Christ, the Apostle Paul calls "another gospel" (Galatians 1:6-7) and is regarded as heretical.

**4. Ethics.** Ethical human behavior is tied to worldview. Whether one worships the gods of the world religions or the heretical gods of the cults, worldview determines ethical behavior. The thesis of this section is that biblical Christianity roots ethics in God's moral law as revealed in His Word. Erwin Lutzer makes this compelling argument: "If naturalism is false and if theism is true, and therefore God is responsible for all that is, then revelation is possible. And if revelation is possible, then absolute standards are possible, should the Deity choose to make them known." [Erwin Lutzer. *The Necessity of Ethical Absolutes* (Dallas: Probe, 1981), p. 70] Has God chosen to make such standards known? The resounding answer of biblical Christianity is yes. He has chosen to reveal Himself in His Son (Heb. 1:1-4), through his creation (Ps. 19; Rom. 1:18ff), and through His Word (Ps. 119; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:21); and we know about the Son through the Word. These propositional truths form the basis for ethical absolutes.

What are these propositional truths that constitute the Christian ethical framework?

- God's moral revelation in His Word is an expression of His own nature. He is holy and therefore He insists that His human creatures also meet that standard. If they do not, judgment results. Hence, the vital nature of Jesus' substitutionary atonement. Appropriating that atoning work by faith makes the human holy, and, thus, acceptable to God. The same argument can be made about God's ethical standards of truth, beauty, love, life and sexuality.
- God's moral and ethical system consists of more than external conformity to His moral code; it centers on conformity with internal issues of motivation and personal attitudes. Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount presses this point. The ethical standard of prohibiting adultery involves more than simply the external act; it also involves lusting with the heart after a woman (Matt. 5:27-28). The ethical standard of prohibiting murder involves more than the external act; it involves the standard of bitterness, hatred, and anger in the heart (Matt. 5:21,22).

- God provides the absolute criteria for determining the value of human beings. Because each is arbitrary and relative, physical, economic, mental and social/cultural criteria are all inadequate for assigned value to humans. God created humans in His image (Gen. 1:26ff) and established His absolute criteria for assigning value to human beings. Being in the image of God means that humans *resemble* God. Humans possess self-consciousness, self-will, and moral responsibility, as does God. What humans lost in the Fall (Gen. 3) was righteousness, holiness and knowledge; these are renewed in Christians as they are conformed to the image of Christ. Being in God's image also means humans *represent* God. God's purpose in creating human beings is functional (Gen. 1:26-27). Humans have the responsibility of dominion over creation and of being fruitful and multiplying. Humans represent God as His steward over His world. This concept is emphasized in Genesis 2 and reiterated in Psalm 8 and 110. Humans are God's vice-regent over all creation with power to control, regulate and harness its potential. The Fall did not abolish this stewardship. Instead, Satan is the usurper and enemy of humans in this dominion status. Man lives out of harmony with himself and with nature. Created to rule, humans find that the crown has fallen from their brow.

**5. History.** Past historical perspectives offer little help today. The ancient Greeks adhere to a cyclical philosophy of history that saw history as a series of repetitive cycles--the old idea that history repeats itself. The religions of Hinduism, Buddhism and the amorphous "New Age" movement, with their common emphasis on reincarnation, all view history in the same manner. The common element in all is an absence of hope, meaning and purpose. Other approaches to history are inadequate as well. The 18th century Enlightenment saw history through the grid of progress. The Scientific Revolution of the preceding century and the certainty of constructing a science of man created optimism about humanity that viewed human perfectibility as imminent. Destroyed by the carnage of the 20th century (two World Wars and the Holocaust), the view of progress is no longer viable. Modern Existentialism or Postmodernism offers no meaning to history except individual autonomy and choice. Biblical Christianity offers another approach to history--one rooted in God's revelation and one that gives hope and solid confidence for the future. This approach has four essential aspects:

- First, the Bible calls for a worldview that rejects the cyclical model of history. The ancient Hebrews saw history as a line with a beginning, a middle and an end. Creation marked the initiation of history with God creating the universe *ex nihilo*. The Old Testament evidences God revealing Himself to men and women through many means, while the New Testament demonstrated His power and purposes through miracles and sign gifts. The greatest revelation, the incarnation of Jesus Christ, bifurcates history, and, when He returns, Christ will bring history to an end. For the Christian, then, history is linear, has purpose and meaning and is filled with hope.
- Second to the Christian approach to history is a commitment to God's sovereignty. Daniel 4:17, 25 affirms in the message to King Nebuchadnezzar that God rules in the affairs of men, seeking the counsel of no one. The Old Testament also declares that God's sovereignty entails overruling the evil deeds of men so that His purposes are attained. The narrative of Joseph details God's providence over his life--"the Lord was with Joseph"--despite the evil intents of Potiphar's wife and of his brothers. God's purpose was to preserve life and Joseph was His means of doing that. Furthermore, God's sovereignty extends to the counsel that rulers receive. 2 Samuel 17:14 demonstrates that God thwarted the counsel of Absalom's

adviser, Ahithophel, to secure the safety of David's retreat from Absalom. The crucifixion of Jesus Christ constitutes the foremost New Testament example of God's sovereignty in the face of evil. Acts 4:27-28 depicts this monstrous evil as under God's sovereign control: "for truly in this city there were gathered together against thy holy servant Jesus, whom thou didst anoint, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever they hand and thy plan had predestined to take place."

- A third element in the Christian approach to history is that God uses pagan nations to accomplish His ends. When Jeremiah warned Judah that God was about to judge them for their spiritual adultery, he shows God summoning Nebuchadnezzar, "My servant," to be the instrument of His judgment. In Jeremiah 27:7 God declares "all the nations shall serve him, and his son, and his grandson, until the time of his own land has come." When Isaiah prophesied of the coming liberation of the exiles from captivity, he prophetically named the Persian ruler Cyrus as the one to effect that liberation. God said of Cyrus, "He is my shepherd! And he will perform all My desire . . . Whom I have taken by the right hand to subdue nations before him, and to loose the loins of kings" (Isaiah 44:28-45:1). Thus the Bible strips away the surface of history and reveals the transcendent Sovereign moving history His way.
- Finally, the Christian approach to history focuses on the principle of justice that pervades God's character, and so His history. When He uses a pagan nation to accomplish His ends, as He did in choosing Babylon to judge Judah, His justice demands that that nation likewise be judged. In Jeremiah 50:29 God calls for the nations to align against Babylon: "repay her according to her work; according to all that she has done, so do to her; for she has become arrogant against the LORD, against the Holy One of Israel." When the nation God has raised up accomplishes His purposes, He judges that nation righteously and justly. Just like an individual cannot sin with impunity, so a nation cannot.

Rarely today can we approach world events with the certainty of Jeremiah revealing God's workings with Babylon and Judah; but we can gain a principle that produces confidence and certainty: God stands above the line of history as the Sovereign. Our assurance is that He controls all that occurs on that line for His glorious purposes. There is no geographical refuge that can guarantee such security. That comes only from faith and trust in the Sovereign of history. Genuine biblical Christianity is a wholistic worldview that provides the answers to the key questions of life. It is under severe attack today within Western Civilization. Both the Postmodern and the secular mindset see biblical Christianity as the only major Western worldview articulating and defending absolutes. In that sense, biblical Christianity is the enemy of pluralism and relativism. This book has offered a clear articulation of its major tenets and its distinctives in this pluralistic world. Because our Lord has commanded it and because the fate of billions depends on it, biblical Christianity must be defended with love and it must be championed with courage and boldness.

See James P. Eckman, *The Truth About Worldviews*, pp. 113-119.