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## Q&A#124 What Does Worldview Thinking Miss?

April 6, 2019



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Today's question: "You've criticized 'worldview' approaches on a number of occasions. What are some of the things that you think they are missing?"

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## Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, you've criticized worldview approaches on a number of occasions. What are some of the things that you think they are missing? First of all, worldview approaches tend to approach reality from the perspective of ideas and concepts.

And so ultimately, everything boils down to the certain presuppositions that you bring to reality. These are like the lenses through which you view the world. And these lenses will

determine what you see, how you act, etc.

etc. And these worldviews that we bring are spectacles, the lenses that we bring to reality, the presuppositions that determine the way that we think and act in the world. These are things that ultimately are ideological.

And so we might have a Marxist approach to reality or a nihilist approach to reality. Or let's say a Hegelian approach to reality, maybe something like a postmodern approach to reality. And then you have the Christian approach to reality.

And the important thing is that we must be biblical. We must be people that hold the right ideas about reality. And we must bring those ideas to reality and interpret reality in terms of those ideas.

The emphasis here is that ideas have consequences. The ideas that we hold about reality will shape the way that we live in the world, etc. etc.

And there's an emphasis upon the purity of our ideas, that we must hold ideas that are pure, that we must hold ideas that are not polluted or compromised by non-Christian, non-biblical, unbiblical belief systems. So there's very much quarantine that's set up and this emphasis upon this sterilized environment within which we develop biblical ways of viewing the world. Within that context, there can be a deep suspicion of anything that comes from outside of that particular quarantine zone.

So if you're talking to someone who does not have what is presumed to be a biblical worldview, you treat everything that they say with great suspicion. And on the other hand, this can come with a deep produlity in relationship to ideas that arise within the quarantine zone. That's one of the concerns that I have about worldview approaches.

Worldview approaches do not tend to develop a strong immune system in people. They tend to lead people to react against ideas from outside rather than to engage in them in a critical and searching way. What I would like to see us develop is what I've described in the past as a skin.

What a skin enables you to do is to be in non-sterile environments and to learn and to develop in relationship to a world that is not, you don't have to be quarantined from the world. You can engage in a non-sterile environment and gain from that engagement, become stronger. But yet to engage in that, you need to have this barrier that prevents everything from just coming through to you.

And that's a skin. It enables you to have a self-defined identity, to engage with the world, to take things into yourself from the world, but to do so in a way that does not threaten your well-being. So it avoids you having to quarantine yourself or to sterilize the environment or to be in constant immune reaction or to succumb to the environment.

A skin enables you to engage in non-sterile environments in a way that enables you to grow and be strong. Many Christian worldview approaches are so driven by the concern to have this pure Christian worldview that they cannot engage thoughtfully and receptively with ideas from outside the church. And the result is a very brittle approach to thought, a very brittle approach to how we engage with reality.

Because the assumption is that all the understanding primarily arises within the church. If someone's not got a biblical worldview, then they should be treated with suspicion because everything flows from that unbiblical approach to reality. There's not enough suspicion about the degree to which Christians, even if they hold a certain set of biblical presuppositions, have all sorts of muddled ideas that they have quite naturally.

They don't have to be taught those from outside the church. They pick them up quite naturally. Nor is there much of a sense of the degree to which worldview thinking itself is beholden to ideas that we've inherited from Immanuel Kant and people like that.

We've not come up with this at a whole cloth cut from scripture itself. No, it's something that has come to us through a lot of different secular influences. These influences are not bad things in themselves if they're tested, if they're considered, if they're weighed and valued.

And the problem with worldview thinking is often it either fails to test things that have been deemed biblical or it's overcritical of positions that could actually gain something from if it were in receptive engagement with them. The other thing that it does is it, with that framework of suspicion, it makes it very difficult to have a well calibrated epistemic framework where we trust people that are deserving of trust in certain respects and exercise a bit more caution of others. And so there's a lot of trust placed upon certain people who supposedly hold a biblical worldview without realising that putting that much trust in someone is probably not a good thing.

Nor is it that healthy to restrict the degree of trust that you place in, for instance, secular authorities. There's a lot that you can learn from them. And the suspicion towards science, for instance, in many quarters, the suspicion towards whether it's certain views on biology, certain views on meteorology, whatever, climate change, evolution, these sorts of things, the way that people approach those can often be framed by a certain conspiracy theory mindset.

Now, that doesn't mean that there can't be problems with these approaches, but there is a deeper problem when we just approach things as conspiracy theories, as conspiracy theorists who have an ill calibrated epistemic framework, who are constantly failing to exercise trust in proportional and careful ways to weigh thoughts carefully, rather than to treat everything in a brittle manner. And that concern is one that often is something I have when I view Christian approaches to worldview. Christian approaches to worldview are also so highly ideological that they fail to see the degrees of overlap and interchange

that can exist between positions.

And that over of this exchange and overlap can occur when we're engaging with the concrete reality of the actual world, because that world is not the property of any single worldview. It's a common reality. And the more that we are engaged and attentive and invested in that reality, the more that we'll actually be able to share with and learn from each other.

And people's views and beliefs are not always determined from some crucial presupposition that filters out into everything. There are ways in which we have master beliefs that do play out in different ways, but for the most part, that's not the way we live our lives, Christians included. Rather, we have a lot of different beliefs on different levels that work in different ways and interact with each other.

And when we're engaging with reality, there's a lot that we have in common with anyone else who's engaging honestly and attentively with that reality. That doesn't mean that holding certain biblical beliefs doesn't give you a deeper insight into reality, but it's a different sort of thing. It's interesting when we look at the new and when we look at scripture, for instance, if we look at the wisdom literature, the wisdom literature isn't delivered as a direct revelation.

It's not presented in that way. Rather, it's given by the insight of the sage who is able to perceive in reality God's truth. And that's a different thing.

It's not the same thing as each one of those statements being immediately given to the writer apart from any reflection upon reality. That's not how it happens. What the writer of the book of Proverbs or Ecclesiastes is doing is engaging with reality attentively and thoughtfully and then deriving insight from that that he shares.

And in that act of engaging insight from reality, he's doing exactly the same thing as the sages from other people in the ancient Near East. This is not some exclusive task of a biblical approach to reality. Rather, he has a lot in common with approaches from outside of Israel.

And when we're engaging with reality, if we're doing so faithfully and attentively, we will find the same thing. We will find that there's a lot to be learned from people outside. But then also when we're engaging faithfully, we will have an attentively and in ways that are informed by biblical beliefs and insights and the perspective.

There will be a lot of things that we can give to people that they would not necessarily see for themselves. But the idea that we have some corner upon the market of wisdom, that we have that to have a biblical worldview is to be to solve everything. It just does not work that way.

And the assumption is a lot of the time that if you hold the right set of views, if you hold

the right ideas, everything tends to fall into place. And if you're acting wrongly, you're obviously holding the wrong ideas. If you're suffering with depression, for instance, you're obviously not thinking about yourself in a biblical enough way.

Or if you're struggling with, if your children are not being raised in the right way, obviously you're not following biblical approaches to parenting. And in many of these cases, it's just not that straightforward. Things aren't driven by just these master ideas.

Rather, we need to be attentive to reality and engage with that in a practical and a prudent and a thoughtful and a wise way. One that is informed by deep Christian belief, but one that is not going to be absolutely determined by that. Because when it comes to raising your particular kids, there are a lot of things that just come down to your getting to know your kids.

Being able to understand what makes them tick, what will work for them. And that won't necessarily be some packaged biblical approach. It may just be a matter of you have to develop some wisdom.

You have to be attentive to them. And that is a very different approach to the one that biblical approaches, biblical worldview approaches can often offer us. There's the downplaying of, as I mentioned, of what we have in common with others.

If you want to learn how to parent your kids, there's a lot that you can learn from non-Christians. They will have a lot to teach you. There are a lot of things you need to be aware of and critical of, but they do have a lot to teach you.

On the other hand, if you believe that having the right set of ideas will deliver you from all the problems, you're in for a bumpy ride and you're in for a nasty wake up call. Often I think people believe that if, for instance, you send your kids to a school with a biblical worldview, they will turn out and holding a set of Christian beliefs, Christian practices, etc. as if everything in our lives flow from a certain set of ideas that we hold.

It just does not do that. Often our lives are determined far more by practice, far more by the ways that we're embedded in the world. That's another thing I find a problem with worldview approaches, that they are just unable to wrestle with the degree to which we are shaped by practice and the concrete reality in which we are embedded.

So if you want to think about thinkers that have really shaped the modern world, maybe spend a bit less time thinking about people like Marx and Hegel and Immanuel Kant and people like Nietzsche and other people like that. Pay less attention to them. Pay a lot more attention to people like Henry Ford or Frederick Winslow Taylor or Alexander Graham Bell, Michael Faraday or people like that.

These are the Gregory Pinkus or Charles Babbage. These sorts of people are the people that have shaped the modern world in many ways far more than even someone like Karl

Marx. When we think about these people, what have they done? They've brought in new techniques and those techniques shape the way that we live our lives in a far more powerful way than abstract ideas tend to do.

If you want to think about what has changed your life more, what has changed your life more, postmodernism or the invention of the automobile? What has changed the way that we live our lives, that we work more? Someone like, I don't know, Aristotle or someone like Alexander Graham Bell. These are, they change our lives in different ways, but we often do not pay enough attention to the ways that our lives are shaped, not by ideas, concepts, but by practices, by techniques, by the way that our lives are now ordered around the car. Our lives are ordered around the invention of telecommunications and things like the inventions of Alexander Graham Bell, the invention of the mobile devices, things like the invention of the Internet, Tim Berners-Lee.

All these sorts of things shape our lives a great deal more than abstract ideas. Same when we're talking about sexual relations, as I was doing yesterday. If we're thinking about what has shaped modern sexual relations, pay more attention to people like Gregory Pinkus and the invention of the birth control pill.

Pay more attention to things like the way the modern economy is ordered. Pay more attention to things like the role of modern education systems. And all these things are not so much just about ideas.

They're about the formation of classes. They're about the formations of life patterns and the implicit notions that we have. They aren't really considered notions.

They're just habits that we built up. Our perception of what it means to go through life and to hit certain milestones. Now, that's not so much a set of ideas.

It's not a set of presuppositions in the way that most people tend to think about that. And if we're going to set that right, it's not going to be primarily through ideas. It's through reconfiguring and reconsidering the ways that we order our society.

And that's engaging far more with the practical reality in front of us. It's going to change the way that you use your mobile devices. Maybe design towns that aren't developed around the car anymore.

Maybe try and design economies that aren't designed that make it very expensive to move great distances. And make it encourage people to be far more rooted in a particular place. Those are the things that have changed our society far more than anything else.

When we think about ideas, it's not so much these big lofty ideological notions. It's these very concrete realities that have been created and the way that they have changed our

lives. But ideological thinking doesn't really pay attention to that.

Worldview thinking doesn't really pay attention to that. And if you hold the right ideas, things won't necessarily fall into place. If you continue to live your life in a way that's determined by all the realities of the modern world, you'll tend to come out with the same outcomes.

Even if you are changing all these ideas in your mind, we need to focus far more upon acting wisely in the world that we have in front of us. That requires a sort of consent to our limitations. To recognising that we are placed within a very limited position.

We're placed within a world that's determined by all these different technologies, by these ways of life, by certain practices and habits and conceptual instincts. And we need to navigate that wisely. That will require a deep grasp of Christian truth, but also a deep attentiveness to the situation that we're placed with it.

And a willingness to engage thoughtfully, creatively and receptively with views from outside. And to learn in that sort of context. Humbly recognising that we do have something to learn.

I've found a helpful approach to this is what Rowan Williams, I think in the context of discussing Richard Hooker, has called contemplative pragmatism. And in contemplative pragmatism, we're deeply reflective. We think about what is good.

What do we want to work towards? What are the ideals that we should be realising? What are some of the situations that we have within our world that determine the way that we act? And this contemplative approach is very attentive to reality. It's deeply reflective upon our ideals and our values and upon the beliefs that we hold. But then it's pragmatic.

It's recognising the concreteness of the situations in which we are embedded. The need to work wisely and prudently within those situations to consent to our limitations and to work to relate our practical situations and our practical lives to our deeper ideals and values. And that requires a lot of things that worldview thinking does not prepare you for.

Worldview thinking will often suggest that if you hold a certain set of beliefs and if you practise this particular system, you will get positive results. It works that straightforwardly. It really does not.

And that approach that sees everything flowing neatly from a certain set of presuppositions or worldview beliefs, in practice, it often lets people down. It often leads us to believe that a certain set of fundamental values cash out in practical activity in a very straightforward manner. But yet there is a great deal of wisdom that must intercede between the deep values that we hold, which should be Christian, which should be

biblical, and what it means to be practical, to live lives that are wise and engaged with the practical realities of the world in a good and upright way.

There's a lot of wisdom that must intercede between those things and also a lot of consent to the limitations that we find. There are many ways in which the modern world makes it difficult to realise a lot of Christian values. And we often need to consent to the fact that we will not be able to have, for instance, a society that is as humanising an economy as we should have.

We should be moving towards that and we should be pushing to create such a thing to the degree that we can. But we can't hold an all or nothing approach. And the whole emphasis upon the purity of the Christian worldview, in actual fact you're going to have to get your hands dirty in reality.

That doesn't mean that you're going to have to be sinful. It just means that you're going to have to recognise your limitations and recognise that we do not have a system that will tidily produce everything in an ideal form just because we have certain beliefs at the root. And so as Christians I think we need to be a lot more engaged with the nitty gritty of reality, attentive to that, attentive to the people around us who are also engaged with that because we hold that reality in common.

And as we engage with them we will learn a lot about how well, how we can improve the way that we act within this world. If you have any further questions please leave them on my Curious Cat account. If you would like to support this and other videos like it, first of all tell people about these and share them with others.

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God bless.