

“How to be Transformed in College:
The Role of the Christian Worldview”

Dr. David K. Naugle
Professor of Philosophy
Dallas Baptist University

The voice on the other end of the line sounded desperate: “Hi, uh, I’m Lori, the adult student in your eleven o’clock Christian ethics class?” “Sure, Lori, I know who you are,” I responded quickly. She had already distinguished herself not only by being somewhat older than the majority of her classmates, but also by her hearty laugh, and by her self-identification as a staff writer for the student newspaper.

“You remember,” she continued a bit frantically, “how you were talking in class this morning about worldviews and their impact on ethics?” I was beginning to wonder what this call on the very first day of the new semester might mean. “Of course,” I said, explaining that I always began that class by showing how answers to big questions about reality and knowledge affect ethical values and choices.

“Well, I am thirty-five years old,” she informed me, “and today in your class I discovered I don’t have a worldview, Christian or otherwise. I’m not sure what I believe about much of anything, and I’ve got to talk to you as soon as possible. Would later this afternoon be okay?” Given the obvious urgency of her situation, I said “Certainly. Why don’t we meet at the IHOP just north of campus in about an hour?” “Great,” she said. “I’ll see you then.”

For about three hours over glasses of iced tea, we talked about the deepest issues of human life. I did my best to explain to her how the Bible addresses the crucial questions about God, knowledge, humanity, sin, death, redemption, and so on. I spelled out to her how the Scriptures provide a worldview that is comprehensive, consistent, and practical. In the process of our conversation, the gospel of Jesus Christ came through loud and clear, and Lori responded

enthusiastically—right there in the booth! Her countenance changed, and so did her heart. Soon, she began sharing her new found faith and view of life with her husband, and a few short weeks later he believed also. Ever since, they have been active and influential members in their Episcopalian church.

Lori's story reminds me frequently of the power of the gospel and the biblical worldview to change a human life. As a college professor for almost twenty years, I have seen this transformation happen often, not only in non-Christians like Lori, but also among students who have been believers for years.

Crystal Zaidle, a soon-to-be medical student who is presently studying at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia, is a case in point. Though a lifelong Christian, her perspective on things changed significantly when she was introduced to the biblical worldview in college.

I first encountered the biblical worldview in a course I took in my last semester as an undergraduate. Although I had grown up in church and was about to graduate from a Christian university, I felt as though I was hearing the gospel for the first time. I began to understand the nature of the freedom Christ had bestowed. I was free to be and do what I was created to be and do—a human being fully alive!¹

How can more and more people like Lori and Crystal, non-believer and believer alike, discover the transformative power of the whole gospel and the biblical worldview? That's a question I've asked myself often. As a means of evangelism, I am interested in presenting Christianity as a complete system of thought with Jesus Christ at the center. But as a professor on the campus of a Baptist university, I am especially interested in the change that frequently takes place in *Christian* students when they encounter the biblical worldview. That's specifically what I'd like to explore in this article.

In thinking about these things, one idea keeps impressing itself upon me, namely, that if any significant worldview change is ever to occur in students,

something must *first* happen in the lives of their professors. Please allow me to share a word or two about what has happened to me.

The Transformation of the Professor

“You cannot impart to others what you do not possess yourself!” So roared Prof. Hendricks from his lectern in a course I took from him on Bible study methods my first semester in seminary. How true, I thought to myself. And how deeply I desired to have a genuine knowledge and authentic experience of the faith I so wanted to transmit to others. There was no doubt in my mind that the Scriptures prescribed transformation (e.g., 2 Cor. 3: 18). There was no uncertainty in my heart that I needed and wanted to be changed. This was a personal prerequisite as well as a prerequisite for effective service to others. After all, common sense dictated that those who would kindle others must themselves also burn!

The process of “burning” began for me when I trusted in Jesus Christ through a televised Billy Graham crusade at the age of seventeen. That was in August of 1970, the summer before my senior year in high school. As a freshly minted believer, I grew rapidly through involvement in my high school Young Life club. Later in college, my faith deepened through association with the Young Life Leadership group in Fort Worth, Texas. There in-depth Bible study, systematic theology, and the writings of C. S. Lewis and Francis Schaeffer were common fare. Those were the days!

Like so many others who came to faith in the turbulent Sixties and Seventies, Schaeffer’s interpretation of Christianity as a worldview that embraced the whole of life was uniquely attractive to me. His writings not only addressed “true spirituality,” but also engaged the culture comprehensively with “true truth.” At the time there were other versions of Christianity competing for my allegiance. By God’s grace, however, I found my life’s anchor in the comprehensive biblical world view

established upon the basic pillar points of creation, fall, and redemption. It was a vision which reached all the way back to the Scriptures, and had a distinguished pedigree in Church history and the reformational tradition.

From early on I read just about every book on worldview I could get my hands on. Books by James Sire, Arthur Holmes, Brian Walsh, Richard Middleton, Albert Wolters, Chuck Colson, and many others were my constant companions.² I learned that God's sovereignty wasn't limited to the spiritual realm, but extended to the particulars of life and all reality. I made the wonderful discovery of the world as God's very good creation. I grounded my identity as a whole person in the image and likeness of God. I recognized the disastrous effects of sin on all things. I understood the meaning and significance of the incarnation of the Son of God. I embraced the gospel of the Kingdom in Jesus Christ whose redemptive work restores all creation.

The fire in these biblical concepts kindled me. Ever since I have endeavored, with God's help, to strike a similar spark in the lives of my brothers and sisters in Christ. Drawing on categories from Ezra 7: 10,³ my project has been to develop a Christian worldview on the basis of the Scriptures and the best in Western intellectual tradition, to apply it to my own life, and to communicate it persuasively to others. This I perceive to be my primary vocational calling. Having received the torch of the biblical worldview, I seek to pass it along to others.

For me the main arena for doing this has been with students in the college classroom. I have had the privilege of teaching at The University of Texas at Arlington during the 1980s, and at Dallas Baptist University in the 1990s until the present. Students are at that crucial stage in life when forming a coherent view of God, self, others, and the world is very much a conscious priority. They are ripe for worldview development.

But this revolutionary change simply won't happen in students if it hasn't already happen in their teachers. The starting point and prerequisite for pupil transformation is professor transformation. For indeed, apprentices will rarely if ever come to possess what their mentors are simply unable to impart. Thereby hangs the tale! But if professors are able to impart it because they do possess it, then the potential for student change is staggering!

But what body of truth is it that has the power to turn a life from a day, that is actually a kind of night, to true day?⁴

Transformation of the Curriculum

I have discovered that Christian students often come to the university encumbered by three obstacles that pose a serious challenge to the development of a biblical worldview.

The first is a destructive pattern of thinking that divides life and reality into the two separate and distinct categories of the sacred and secular. What teaching can subvert this menacing dualism—perhaps the most significant adversary to the Christian vision—and replace it with the conviction of the goodness of the whole of created reality?

The second is an often unrecognized but distorted experience of the faith as bits and pieces (miscellaneous doctrines and practices) rather than in terms of a total? They know the parts, but what is the whole into which they fit? What curriculum can unify the Christian fragments and join them into a harmonious system of thought and life?

The third is an inability to connect New Testament Christianity to its Old Testament background, and place it in the context of the overall biblical story. What set of ideas can hook up the two testaments and disclose God's unifying purpose in creation, history, and redemption from Genesis to Revelation?

For DBU graduate Jennifer Smith, the first of these three liabilities, that of dualism, was particularly pernicious in its effect on her university studies. As she tells the story, she arrived on the DBU campus as a freshman with one primary goal in mind: to land a well paying job upon graduation. Aside from this, education held little additional value, and she was convinced that it had little bearing on her faith. After all, she reasoned, God is concerned exclusively about spiritual matters, and He couldn't care less about biology, psychology, the fine arts and so on.

But a turning point came for Jennifer in her junior year. At that time, she had a head-on collision with the dualism that was shaping her attitudes not only toward education, but also toward life in general. Listen carefully as she recounts her discovery and reveals its source.

Dualism, I discovered, is essentially separating life into two opposing spheres—things pertaining to God, and things that are not. It's precisely this type of split-level thinking that led me to erect a distinct barrier between my faith and my academic endeavors. What hit smack dab in between the eyes my junior year is that this mindset is most definitely rooted in an incorrect understanding of the Scriptures and of God Himself.⁵

What approach to Christianity could help Jennifer, and others like her, not only deal with the problem of dualism, but also tackle the other issues that have put the biblical vision of life in eclipse? What I have seen do the trick is presenting a fresh understanding of the whole narrative of Scripture as it progressively unfolds from the beginning to the very end. In this story, the biblical worldview is disclosed in all its fullness and glory.

Of course, many Christian students are already familiar with the shape and substance of the story. It's just a matter of helping them think about it in a new light, approach it from a different angle, and draw out its fuller implications. Let me attempt to summarize it ever so briefly, focusing on the themes of creation, fall, and redemption, and highlighting the theological features of its unfolding plot.

It begins, not with Jesus and the New Testament, but in the beginning with God the Father Almighty, Maker of the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1-2). He creates a world which in its parts is deemed “good” (Gen. 1: 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25) and as a whole is deemed “very good” (Gen. 1: 31). God’s complete handwork is characterized by an immeasurable sanctity that eliminates any evil, inferiority, or secularity in the essential nature of things. All reality, as poet Gerard Manley Hopkins has said, is charged with grandeur of God (see Isa. 6: 3).

The creation account also discloses God’s original and permanent purposes for human beings on planet earth in an original commission, the importance of which is hard to overemphasize. It’s found in Genesis 1: 26-28, labeled by theologians as the “creation decree” or “cultural mandate.” In these three remarkable verses, our identity and purposes are specified. Regarding our identity, we are made as God’s image and likeness, the essence of our humanity, and the source of our unique distinction and value. In terms of our purposes, first we are commissioned to have dominion over creation as culture-formers. And second, as male and female, we are commanded to be fruitful and multiply, establishing marriage and family. Such was the world God made for us to enjoy in Him. He intended us for *shalom*.

But the story continues in Genesis 3 where we read of the violation of God’s commandment and the catastrophe of the fall (Gen. 3). We are separated from God, alienated within ourselves, disconnected from others, and at enmity with the earth. The peace is broken. Judgments are pronounced and the paradise becomes a wilderness. The sacred character of the world as the theater of the divine glory is lost from view. We have to make our way into the future without God in a shattered and tragic world.

But God, being rich in mercy, is not content to leave us or His planet in a state of misery and deception. He purposes to redeem it all. Beginning with an cryptic promise in Genesis 3: 15, He declares that the offspring of the woman will one day would defeat the serpent and destroy all evil. With this, the unfolding drama of redemption begins. At the heart of this love story is a series of redemptive covenants made between God and Israel. The narrative focuses on the progressive fulfillment of those covenant promises through God's mighty deeds and words in history, culminating in Jesus Christ and His saving work. In short, the Old Testament promises redemption, and the New Testament records its fulfillment "already" and its consummation "not yet." We believers live "in-between-the times," enjoying the renewal of God's original purposes for our lives as new creatures in Christ. The sacramental character of life and the world is restored. We are commanded by Him who is the Lord of heaven and earth to fulfill the Great Commission the purpose of which is to renew the original commission given by God in the beginning.

This is the greatest story ever told. It is the narrative dwelling we inhabit. In it we delight. By it we are changed. Through it we are guided. Upon it we live. About it we must speak. We must help the Church and the world recover its complete story.⁶

Telling the grand narrative in this way seems to have been a great concern for Christian leaders from St. Augustine to Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In catechizing candidates for Christian baptism, the great Church father required that new believers be exposed to the overall plot of the Scriptures. He asserted that "The narration is complete when each person is catechized in the first instance from what is written in the text, 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth,' on to the present times of the Church."⁷ For Augustine, this overview would provide a

framework for Christian doctrines and practices, elucidating their place within the whole, and intensifying their meaning and significance.

Similarly, Dietrich Bonhoeffer made lengthy narrative readings from the Old and New Testaments a daily devotional requirement for his underground seminary community in Finkenwalde. He knew this was the only way to grasp the full, canonical meaning of Jesus Christ.

As a whole the Scriptures are God's revealing Word. Only in the infiniteness of its inner relationships, in the connection of Old and New Testaments, of promise and fulfillment, sacrifice and law, law and gospel, cross and resurrection, faith and obedience, having and hoping, will the full witness to Jesus Christ the Lord be perceived.⁸

When students catch a glimpse of the faith in this cosmic perspective, the possibility and power for change is substantially increased. It debunks their dualism through its emphasis on the goodness of creation. It synthesizes for them the bits and pieces of the Christian faith, joining them together into an organic whole. It connects the testaments through a unifying purpose established in creation and restored by redemption. They are set free from a fishbowl-sized faith and begin to swim in the ocean-sized biblical vision of life! They experience transformation, becoming fully alive and fully human under God.

And speaking of transformation, do you remember Jennifer? The conclusion to her story about her educational journey is quite encouraging. Through an encounter with the biblical story like the one rehearsed above, her dualistic mindset collapsed like a house of cards on a water bed.⁹ She found a new inner freedom and powerful motivation for her education as she explains here.

Once dualism was exposed in my life for what it was—the opposite of wholistic, biblical thinking—the effects of its rejection spread like wildfire. Suddenly, I had an interest in the different academic disciplines, and a desire to learn about God's truth through them. I found myself looking forward to class, lingering after it was over to discuss my thoughts with my professors, and engaging in “academic” conversation with fellow students beyond the walls of the classroom.

Even when I ran into subjects that I felt I didn't possess a natural aptitude for, I could at least appreciate their significance within the scope of a liberal arts education. Nearly three years now after graduation, my love of learning continues to express itself in many ways.¹⁰

On the basis of the power of God's Word, as well as Jennifer's experience—and Lori's and Crystal's and my own—I am convinced that when the transforming vision of the biblical story and worldview is taught effectively by transformed professors who have received its truth into their own bloodstream, the likely result will be the transformation of a multitude of students whose minds, hearts, and lives will never be the same again. I have more proof of this point in the testimonies which follow.

The Transformation of Students

As I mentioned earlier, college students as young adults are prime candidates for the process of meaning-making and the establishment a solid and sustaining view of life. Sharon Parks, in her excellent book *The Critical Years*, bears this out in a remarkable passage.

Young adulthood is the birthplace of adult vision. Never before and never again in the life cycle is there the same constellation of forces available to enable the formulation of a life-transforming vision. The vision that grounds the young adult self will, for better or worse, enhance or diminish the possibilities of the whole of adult life. The era of young adult faith—in which truth, meaning, and ultimacy are composed—is a vital opportunity given to every generation for the renewal of human life.¹¹

Here are several testimonies from students, past and present, that confirm Parks' thesis. Gary Cantwell, presently a software executive in Houston, was involved in a college ministry on the campus of UT-Arlington in the mid-1980s. He writes these words describing his initial contact with the biblical worldview: "When I gave my life to God, I began to understand the 'big picture.' I embraced the Christian worldview in my life. That was seventeen years ago. How has my life been different after I began to view it from a Christian perspective?" For Gary and his wife

Patti, one of the biggest differences has been in the way they raise their children, especially by helping them recognize God's involvement in all aspects of life.

As my wife and I raise our young children, we teach them that God loves them very much. We teach them that He cares about *everything* they do—seven days a week—not just what happens at Sunday School. He cares about the meals we eat, the games we play, the movies we watch, and the way we treat our family members and friends. He cares about what we learn in school, how we view history, what work we do, and what books we read. As our children grow, they are seeing God at work in all aspects of their lives and learning to look at the world as He does.¹²

For DBU alumna Angie Scott, who now teaches physical education at a middle school in Katy, Texas, an encounter with the biblical worldview was the high point of her college career. “I learned about lots of ‘stuff’ and life in college,” she wrote to me recently. “But I really think the most helpful thing has been being introduced to the Christian worldview. It just makes me wonder why I, a Christian, had to go to college to learn that!”¹³

Kendra Lucus, a recent DBU graduate who now works in the University's office of undergraduate admissions, has a similar word of testimony: “The concept of the Christian worldview and a wholistic perspective of myself has been the hardest thing I have ever had to comprehend. But I am not the same person as a result. It has enabled me to become a more whole and more fulfilled creature of God!”¹⁴

Libby Bloodsworth, a DBU junior who runs on the cross-country track team, wrote these pertinent words in a paper outlining her goals for her college career: “So far in my college education, the highlight has been this semester when I was introduced to the idea of forming my own Christian worldview.”¹⁵

Christi Williams, a sophomore general studies major, has recognized early on the importance role of the biblical worldview in her moral and intellectual formation. As she explains, “The college years are critical since so much of who I will be, what

I will be, and how I will live is being shaped. I want to be shaped by the worldview that grows out of the Word of God, and on that basis allow every class I take, every book I read, every friend I make, and every experience I have to shape my life and deepen my love for God.”¹⁶

For junior religion major Matt Henderson, the concept of the biblical worldview greatly enlarged his understanding of social involvement and vocation. “The Christian worldview,” he says, “opened my eyes to see God in every aspect of life such as business, politics, education, art, sports and so on. I used to think there were some things that God was more involved in or pleased with than others. But in Genesis 1, we see God’s life-long task for man, the cultural mandate, civilization! Christians must not separate from, but participate in the work and activity of society. Consequently, I have learned that every legitimate occupation within our culture is significant and special to God, the carpenter, the pastor, the police officer, and the housewife, all are vital. When it comes to pleasing God, the pastor’s job is no more or less important than the janitor who cleans the church. I have been challenged by a transforming Christian worldview to step in and join our society, Christianly!”¹⁷

Rachel Barsness, a junior general studies major, explains the pervasive impact that an encounter with a biblical worldview has had on her life. “Developing my Christian worldview,” she states, “has been the *catapult* of my faith and I am just beginning to tap into the power God gives to transform my life and the world around me. It has provided a grid of truth by which I can evaluate every belief and issue I encounter. I can engage my culture, share my faith with non-believers more confidently, and live in the fullness of the humanity that God originally created me to enjoy. I seek to know God through my studies, the enjoyment of nature, and all other areas in which I function as a human being. I feel alive and free to enjoy what

God has created. Each day holds significance when I learn how the details of life fit within the coherent picture of God's larger story."¹⁸

Finally, Kevin Collison, a DBU junior communications major, reports a change of perspective in his life as a result of exposure to the concept of the Christian worldview: "I have long realized the potential of personal salvation, but only through tackling the issue of a biblical worldview have I realized the incredible scope of redemption. I have been humbled by my previous naiveté and encouraged to passionately seek the inbreaking of the kingdom of God in my sphere of human existence and activity."¹⁹

Upon hearing the testimonies of these students, you may ask: how can I have the same life-altering experience through a fresh perspective on the faith as a comprehensive world and life view? It may take some work and sweat, but you must dig down deep into yourself as if you were soil, and answer a series of very important questions.²⁰

First, what is my worldview? Do I really even have one? Can I articulate it? Does my Christian life suffer from the "bits and pieces" syndrome? Just how comprehensively biblical is my outlook on life? To what extent have I been influenced by a shrunken view of the faith, and/or by influences stemming from the surrounding culture?

Second, to what extent have I been duped by dualistic thinking? Do I divide reality into intrinsically holy and profane realms? If so, does this view come from the Bible? If not, where? How has dualism possibly affected my view of the Christian life? How might I overcome this split perception of reality on the basis of the Scriptural view of creation and the incarnation?

Third, do I recognize that Christianity vitally includes, but is not limited to my personal spiritual experience? Do I recognize, as Harry Blamires has said, that it is a comprehensive "interpretation of the meaning of the universe and the purpose of life"?²¹

Fourth, what is my conception of God's sovereignty and kingdom? Do I limit the range of His rule to religious affairs alone? Do I extend it to the whole realm of the reality and all things within it? Would I agree with Francis Schaeffer who said

that the Lordship of Christ applies to all of life and to all of life equally? Why or why not and with what implications?

Fifth, do I understand New Testament Christianity and my relationship with Jesus Christ in the context of the entire biblical story? What is the whole biblical story anyway? How do the themes of creation, fall, and redemption shape my understanding of the Bible? Can I really understand what Christianity is in isolation from its Old Testament background and context?

Sixth and finally, am I open to change? Am I willing to ask the above questions and think these things through for myself? What kind of adjustments might I need to make to make myself vulnerable to a new perspective on life in light of the biblical worldview?

How you answer these questions may make all the difference in your life! Pray that God will send fresh breezes from His Holy Spirit into your mind and heart to reveal truth from His Word about the incredible scope and implications of the faith that you may have never entertained before. Your humanity and wholeness, your family and relationships, your vocation and ministry, your church and the culture, indeed, the very glory of God depends upon it!

I am encouraged as I see more and more university students opening themselves up to the transforming vision of the Christian worldview. But as we have seen, this process of significant change must begin with their professors who have discovered and teach a Christianity that is generous, substantial, and whole. If this continues to happen not only among the college crowd, but throughout the Church, there is reason for hope. Otherwise, the consequences are better left unspoken.²²

NOTES

¹ Personal correspondence with the author, January 24, 2000.

² See *The Francis Schaeffer Trilogy: The God Who Is There, Escape From Reason, and He Is There And He Is Not Silent*, (Westchester, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1990); James Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog*, 3d

ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997); Arthur F. Holmes, *Contours of a Worldview*, IFACS Studies in a Christian World View (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983); Brian Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View*, with a foreword by Nicholas Wolterstorff (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1984); Albert Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985); Charles Colson and Nancy Pearcey, *How Now Shall We Live?* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1999). One other lesser known but extremely helpful book written to university students to explain to them the Orthodox Christian worldview is Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1973).

³ “For Ezra had set his heart *to study* the law of the Lord, and *to practice* it, and *to teach* His statutes and ordinances in Israel.” Ezra 7: 10, NASB.

⁴ See Plato, *Republic*, 521c-d.

⁵ Personal correspondence with the author, January 15, 2000.

⁶ For an account of “How the World Lost Its Story,” see the article bearing this title by Robert W. Jenson in *First Things* (October 1993). It is also anthologized in *The New Religious Humanists: A Reader*, ed. and intro. Gregory Wolf (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 135-49.

⁷ St. Augustine, “On The Catechising of the Uninstructed,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 3 (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1994), 285 (§3.5).

⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. and intro. John W. Doberstein (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1954), 51.

⁹ A phrase I believe from J. Budziszewski.

¹⁰ Personal correspondence.

¹¹ Sharon Parks, *The Critical Years: The Young Adult Search for a Faith to Live By* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1986), 96-7.

¹² Personal correspondence with the author, January 31, 2000.

¹³ Personal correspondence with the author, January 7, 2000.

¹⁴ Personal correspondence with the author, January 21, 2000.

¹⁵ Libby Bloodsworth, "My Vision of Education," Dallas Baptist University, November 24, 1999.

¹⁶ Personal correspondence with the author, February 4, 2000.

¹⁷ Personal correspondence with the author, February 4, 2000.

¹⁸ Personal correspondence with the author, February 4, 2000.

¹⁹ Personal correspondence with the author, December 8, 1999.

²⁰ This image is from St. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick, Oxford World Classics (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 193 (§10.25).

²¹ Harry Blamires, *Repair the Ruins: Reflections on Educational Matters from the Christian Point of View*, (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1950), 22.

²² This last phrase is taken from a line by Plato in the *Laws*: "So long as the young generation is and continues to be well brought up, our ship of state will have a fair voyage; otherwise the consequences are better left unspoken."