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The Discipleship Mirage - Part 2
The Quest for a Comprehensive Approach to Discipleship Training

By Freddy Davis

My personal journey down the road of helping churches put a focus on discipleship training began with my missionary experience. My wife and I served nearly 17 years as missionaries in two different countries – nearly 12 years in Japan, and five years in Latvia.

Traditionally, the work of a missionary has been to go to a location where there are not a lot of Christians and share the gospel of Christ. The typical missionary experience has the missionary going to a place where some non-biblical worldview is dominant. In our case, the dominant beliefs we had to interact with was Japanese Shinto and Buddhism in Japan, and atheistic Naturalism in Latvia. With that being the case, it was not enough merely to share the gospel message with people, we had to do it in a way that crossed worldview barriers.

A worldview is defined as the assumptions people make about the nature of reality. Thus, when a person attempts to communicate the gospel across a worldview barrier, they must do more than merely share the gospel message, they have to do it in a way that helps the listener understand a way of thinking that is outside of their understanding of what is real. When you think about it that way, it is a REALLY big deal. Thus, before a person is able to understand the message itself, they must first understand the frame of reference (the structure of reality) of the Christian message. If they can't get that, the message won't even make sense to them. They

will consider it fantasy – outside of their understanding of reality.

When we returned to live in America, I experienced something that was rather unexpected and shocking. We returned to an American society that had radically changed. What mostly existed as a culture dominated by Judeo-Christian beliefs when we left America, had come to be dominated by atheistic Naturalism. I came to realize that virtually every institution of society had come to be dominated by this naturalistic worldview – media, education, arts and entertainment, government, business, and even many churches.

As I began to interact with various churches and individual Christians, it quickly became apparent that while almost everyone recognized that things were different from how they used to be, and they really didn't like the way things were going, virtually no one understood the change in a way that could help them confidently deal with it.

As I listened to people's observations and frustrations, it suddenly dawned on me what the problem was: America's worldview foundation had shifted. It was this realization that caused me to begin trying to figure out a way to address the problem, and it didn't take me very long to recognize that the solution fell into the arena of teaching worldview concepts as a part of a church's Christian discipleship training. The problem was, essentially, the same problem I had to face as a missionary overseas.

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In thinking through this process, two major challenges rose to the surface.

The First Challenge

The first challenge I perceived had to do with how to share the very concept of worldview. It is not that it is an overly difficult thing to understand, but it does represent a discipleship training paradigm that is completely different from the way American Christians have traditionally dealt with the topic. And it is just different enough that it takes a bit of orientation to get the hang of it.

One of the difficulties is that the word "worldview," itself, is quite prominent these days as you read Christian literature. That said, most people only have a vague understanding of what it really is. The word almost seems to self define – the way people view the world, right? And while that definition is not wrong on a superficial level, it is also not completely right.

The formal definition of a worldview is that it is the assumptions people make about the nature of reality. It is the set of beliefs people have that allows them to make a distinction between what they consider to be real vs. what they understand to be fantasy. And this is what has to be grasped in order to comprehend worldview concepts.

Rarely do people even entertain the thought that what they consider to be real might actually be fantasy. It is virtually inconceivable for anyone. So, when they hear a statement that they consider to be not real (fantasy), they dismiss it out of hand – without even taking the time to think about it. So when someone makes a statement about religious faith that they believe is not true, they just immediately dismiss it. For instance, when an Atheist states

that God doesn't exist, or a Wiccan says they are going to put a spell on you, a Christian is going to simply dismiss those beliefs as fantasy – without ever thinking more deeply about it.

In the past, in America, the Christian view of reality was nearly universally accepted, so using a worldview paradigm to understand society was not necessary. The practical result for churches was that their approach for delivering discipleship training automatically fell into a paradigm that focused almost exclusively on delivering biblical teachings. American Christians hardly ever had to even think about non-theistic beliefs. However, American society has radically changed. These days, we are pluralistic in the faith arena in a way America has never been before. Now, in addition to teaching biblical worldview beliefs, we must also address non-biblical beliefs – and this requires using a worldview paradigm.

The Second Challenge

The first challenge, then, points to a second one. Churches already have an existing tradition for doing discipleship training. And as we all know, changing a deeply embedded traditional approach to doing something, whether it is in business, education, government, or the church, is a massive undertaking. So, the second challenge is to introduce and incorporate worldview concepts into existing church programming.

One thing that is helpful to recognize is that the very concept of discipleship training is generally already incorporated into a church's traditional approach. The traditional way of thinking about the topic is to create a system where various classes can be taught on subjects that are associated with gaining biblical knowledge and skills.

That approach does not have to be totally abandoned, but if the goal is to

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create a system where everyone can constantly be engaged in discipleship training, something must be added to that traditional way of thinking. To be sure, the very process of incorporating a new way of engaging discipleship training will require an orientation about the new approach. But it does not require an ongoing series of classes, only an initial orientation so church members can grasp the concepts.

As we continue forward, a more in-depth explanation of this approach will be addressed, but it is helpful, at this point, to at least introduce it. Then, as we get more into the weeds later on, the concept will already be at least familiar.

Regardless of the faith system one is dealing with, there is a core set of beliefs that define the essentials of the faith. This is true

whether we are dealing with our own Christian faith, or any other one. And the way we get at those core beliefs is to answer three essential questions:

1. What is the nature of ultimate reality?
2. What is a human being?
3. What is the ultimate a person can achieve in this life, and how do they achieve it?

Every belief system in existence answers these three questions based on its ultimate authority source, and the answers define the faith.

As it relates to our worldview discip-

ship training approach, these three questions will be used in every teaching opportunity to train believers concerning the essential faith issues that are being dealt with. The pastor will point these out from the Scripture passage he is preaching from in his sermons. Bible study teachers will point these out concerning the Bible lessons they are teaching. Doing personal Bible study uses these questions to help individuals grasp the core beliefs of the Bible. Concerning evangelistic witness, the answers to these three questions form the very gospel message itself. Learning how other beliefs answer the questions gives you not only a means for understanding them, but also for comparing and contrasting them to our Christian faith in order to effectively analyze for truth and defend our faith (apologetics). In other words, using this approach ultimately gets at EV-

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ERY element of discipleship training – not by adding a bunch of new programs and classes, but by incorporating worldview thinking into what is already being done.

Fulfilling the Quest

Changing church programming will not accomplish the goal of incorporating comprehensive discipleship training into a church. There are just too many elements involved to take that approach and be effective. Something has to be done to refocus what is already being done. A worldview discipleship approach will accomplish that goal.

Next Up: Creating a Disruptor