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The Discipleship Mirage - Part 5
What Is Worldview and Why Use a Worldview Paradigm?

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What is a Worldview?

The word "worldview" is much used these days – particularly in Christian literature. There is a problem, however, that has arisen – different people use the word in quite different ways. As a result, in reading different materials, it is often difficult to know exactly what is meant when you come across it.

In some ways, the word almost seems to self-define – it is the way people think about the world, right? Well, while that is not completely wrong, it is also not completely right. That is such a generic definition that it can be interpreted in quite different ways – and that is exactly what happens. Some people think of it only in terms of a biblical worldview, and thus only focus on trying to get Christians to become grounded in biblical teachings. Others think of it in terms of various religions. With that approach, there is the potential for confusing the different categories of faith systems (worldview systems and belief systems).

To solve this problem, we need to, from the very beginning, define the word. So exactly what is a worldview? The formal definition is: The assumptions people make about the nature of reality.

While at first glance this may seem a little overly philosophical, it is actually very practical. Let's look at two important concepts in the definition.

The first concept is found in the word "assumptions." So what is an assumption? Is it nothing more than a belief that seems so obvious that it is completely taken for granted. It is not even questioned.

The second concept in the definition is "nature of reality." So what, exactly is that? It simply represents the way things actually exist.

So, if we put that all together, what we are dealing with is a set of beliefs about what is real that seems so obvious, no one even thinks to question them.

The reason it is so difficult to deal with this topic is that there are different worldview beliefs that are commonly found in society. That means different people hold entirely different beliefs about what is real vs. what is fantasy. What you might consider real, someone else considers fantasy, and vice versa. So what happens when two people are engaging one another and each of them believes their belief is real and the person they are talking to is speaking fantasy? In that case, both believe that the other is off their rocker.

And this is exactly the situation that exists in modern society. For instance, when a Christian engages an Atheist, both sincerely believe their beliefs are true and the other person's are not. And without understanding worldview concepts, it is nearly impossible to bridge that gap. The reason that is the case is because those beliefs are "assumptions" that are not, and cannot be, backed up by any empirical means. Understanding worldview concepts is necessary to bridge this gap.

Essentials vs. Non-essentials

So how do we get at the core beliefs of a worldview system? It is actually not very difficult. All that is necessary is to find out the answer to three simple questions based on the authority source of the faith

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system. We call these the essential worldview questions. Using these questions, you can get at the essential core beliefs of any and every faith system in existence. Every worldview has its own unique answer to these questions.

The three questions are:

1. What is the nature of ultimate reality?
2. What is a human being?
3. What is the ultimate one can get from this life?

To simplify this, for the purpose of making it easier to grasp the significance of the questions in a Christian context, we can rephrase them as:

1. Who is God?
2. What is man?
3. What is salvation?

In order to make sure, however, that we don't get off track, we must realize that when we use the simplified versions of these questions, we are using the vocabulary of Theism. Not every worldview or belief system understands God, man, and salvation in the same terms as Christians. People who come to us from different worldview backgrounds very well may not express their faith concepts this way. In fact, they may even chafe at this way of dealing with the questions. To keep things in perspective, it is important to realize that both sets of questions are actually different ways of asking the same thing.

One more thing that is important to point out is that it is nearly impossible to overestimate the significance of these questions. Not only does it give us the ability to understand the core beliefs of every faith system, it also gives us the means for comparing one faith system to another, and analyzing for truth. With this knowledge we are in a position to understand our own faith and other

faiths in a way that cannot be done any other way.

Understanding Faith Systems

When I was a kid growing up, I used to make holes in my yard, pull out my dad's golf clubs from the shed, and play golf. The only thing though, I wasn't really playing golf, I was only playing around with the golf equipment. At that time, I didn't know the rules of golf – and really wasn't even concerned about it. Basically I just hit the ball with the club and kept going until I got it into the hole. There was no keeping score and no concern about what was legal and what was not.

It wasn't until years later that I actually started playing the sport. And when I got out on the golf course with other people for real, I couldn't just play like I did as a kid in my yard. Not only is there the mechanical element of hitting the ball with the club, but also an underlying set of rules that must be followed. When playing an actual game of golf, one must be able to master both the mechanics of play AND follow the rules. Otherwise the game does not even make sense. A similar situation exists when it comes to understanding faith systems.

Most people are not aware of the fact that there is more than one faith system category. People generally identify faith systems as merely some form of organized religion that can be observed and practiced. But the truth is, there are two different types of faith systems – one that is observable and has diverse expressions, and another that underlies the first type and defines the parameters within which the diverse belief systems operate. Both types must be understood in order for one's faith to make logical sense. It is this underlying foundation that constitutes the "rules" for a faith system and allows it to have meaning. It is also the thing that helps us understand the unity and diversity of discipleship possibilities.

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Types of Faith Systems

It is fairly easy to see the diversity element in the faith system arena. It is expressed as the many religions, cults, and philosophies that exist in the world. The unity element is found within the worldview categories. These categories are so exclusive that any single belief that strays from the definition of a particular worldview causes it to be something entirely different.

Later, we will look specifically at how that impacts our Christian faith, but before we look at how to draw the line around the Christian faith, there are a few very basic concepts that we must grasp – the first being, a definition of faith itself.

Essentially, faith is something that is believed without empirical evidence. There are, of course, elements of any given set of beliefs that can be known, or disproved, using empirical evidence. But there are other parts that can only be known by human experience or logic. There is NO belief that ANYONE holds that is purely empirical. Every belief system in existence is a combination of all three elements – empirical knowledge, human experience, and logic.

We also need to understand that beliefs are not single isolated elements. Everyone actually holds a combination of beliefs that constitute their faith system. These beliefs are organized on a couple of different levels – a worldview level and a belief system level.

Worldview Systems

The first type of faith system is a "worldview system." This is the underlying set of beliefs that constitute the "rules" of a given faith system. Without the worldview beliefs, nothing makes sense within any given faith system.

Worldview systems are very broad; in fact, there are only four of them –

Naturalism, Animism, Far Eastern Thought, and Theism. And the way we come to understand them is to determine how they answer the four essential worldview questions mentioned above.

The reason understanding worldview systems is so important is because they define an individual's bottom line beliefs about what is real vs. what is fantasy. Everyone, without exception, holds beliefs at this level. Based on their worldview beliefs, everyone thinks that anyone who believes something different from what they "know" to be real must live in a fantasy world.

There is one more important matter that also needs to be understood about worldview systems. Unless a person has taken the time to actually study and contemplate their worldview beliefs, they are completely unconscious – they are merely "assumed" to be true.

Belief Systems

The second type of faith system is a "belief system." There are dozens of these, and they are the beliefs that people hold at a conscious level. These are the many religions, cults, and philosophies that people self-identify with, and will claim as their own.

The Relationship Between Worldview Systems and Belief Systems

There is a recognizable relationship between worldview systems and belief systems – much like the relationship between the skills involved in hitting a golf ball with a club and the rules that govern play. In fact, every belief system is built upon the foundation of one of the worldview systems and shares essential beliefs with it. With this understanding, we can categorize the various belief systems in a way that makes it possible to compare and contrast them, and to evaluate for truth. The following chart

is an example of how this works. Of course there are many other belief systems that are not listed here, but every one of them also fits into the categories below.

Worldview Systems	Naturalism	Animism	Far Eastern Thought	Theism	Hybrids
Belief Systems	Secular Humanism	Voodoo/Santeria	Hinduism	Christianity	Christian Science
	Atheism	Fortunetelling	Buddhism	Jehovah's Witnesses	Unitarian Universalism
	Agnosticism	Witchcraft	Hare Krishna	Mormonism	Satanism
	Skepticism	Astrology	Jainism	Judaism	Scientology
	Marxism	European Paganism	Transcendental Meditation	The Way International	Unification Church
	Positivism	Japanese Shinto	Sikhism	Unity	Bahai
	Postmodernism	Spiritism	Taoism	Islam	New Age

[Note: The "Hybrids" category is not actually a worldview. However, it is listed here as there are numerous hybrid belief systems. Hybrids are attempts to form a belief system by combining essential beliefs from more than one worldview category. Every attempt to do this results in a belief system with built-in internal contradictions that cannot be reconciled.]

The Worldview Dynamic

The worldview concept plays out in numerous arenas as we have seen above. But there is more to know that gives us an even greater understanding of faith matters, and that also has specific application to our Christian faith. One of those has to do with the idea of unity and diversity.

Next Up: Unity in Diversity

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