

BEING BIBLICAL IN A PLURALISTIC AGE

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Abstract

One way to define a disciple is “a follower of someone’s words.” In a pluralistic age, there are many words beckoning would-be disciples to particular ways of life, all promising some kind of wellness. These word-ways are ingredients of worldviews, a program or map for orienting oneself in the world. Worldviews answer core questions about human existence, often in the form of a story. This essay argues that contemporary pluralism is the result of abandoning the Bible as our control story, a loss that is as much a failure of what Charles Taylor calls the social imaginary. If this diagnosis is correct, then the best way for the church to recover a biblical worldview is to focus on evangelizing the social imaginary, a process that begins with local churches inhabiting the drama of redemption of which the Bible is the holy script. The church’s speech and action lives by biblical words made flesh.

Keywords: Pluralism, Worldview, Control Story, Social Imaginary, Church, Disciple

Introduction

Words, words, words. We’re all disciples of certain words. Each one of us is following some script, whether it’s Plato’s philosophy (or a footnote thereof), a scientific textbook, parental wisdom, Hallmark cards, fortune cookies, or simply lines from our favorite films (“Life is like a box of chocolates”—Forrest Gump). These words comprise a condensed story, a philosophy of life or worldview, sometimes small, sometimes large, in light of which we orient ourselves, make sense of things, and decide how best to use our freedom. To act is to prefer one way of telling our story rather than another. Whose words are we following?¹

¹ On the role of story in worldview, see N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 1 (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992), chs. 3 and 5; Robert E. Webber, *Who Gets to Narrate the World: Contending for the Christian Story* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008); Tawa J. Anderson, W. Michael Clark, and David K. Naugle, *An Introduction to Christian*

Wisdom and Wellness: The Problem of the One and the Many 2.0

We are not the first generation to face the challenge of being biblical in a pluralistic age. Ancient Israel lived in a pluralistic land—Canaan—filled with a variety of peoples, practices, and religions, as did the early Christians: just read Acts 17 or Paul’s epistles to the church at Corinth. To hear and do the word of God rather than some other set of words has always been the challenge for the people of God.²

The period that best resembles our current cultural moment, however, may well be the second century after Jesus. Michael Kruger, in his book *Christianity at the Crossroads: How the Second Century Shaped the Future of the Church*, describes it as a transitional century. He admits to being surprised at the parallel: “There is much more in common between the second-century Church and the twenty-first century Church (at least in the Western world) than I originally thought.”³ Then, as now, Christianity possessed little cultural influence: “We need to learn (again) what it means to be the Church when we lack social or political standing.”⁴ In particular, Christianity’s exclusivist commitment to Jesus Christ as the one Mediator, one way, and one truth “was viewed as not only culturally peculiar and intellectually wanting, but also as politically subversive and a threat to the stability of the Roman [read: ‘liberal democratic’] state.”⁵ In sum: “The second century proved to be a time when Christianity found itself immersed deeply in a ‘pluralistic’ world.”⁶ How we respond to our present moment, as our second-century forebears did theirs, will indeed shape the future of the church.

In every generation, God’s people have to decide whose word to follow. The apostle Paul encouraged the Corinthian church to distinguish the wisdom of the cross from the wisdom of the world (1 Cor 1:20–25) and to learn from the example of Israel’s failure to heed God’s word (1 Cor 10:6).⁷

Worldview: Pursuing God’s Perspective in a Pluralistic World (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), ch. 4.

² See, for example, Larry W. Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016) and Harold Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

³ Michael J. Kruger, *Christianity at the Crossroads: How the Second Century Shaped the Future of the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), viii.

⁴ Kruger, *Christianity at the Crossroads*, viii.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ See Richard B. Hays, “Wisdom According to Paul,” in *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found? Wisdom in the Bible, the Church and the Contemporary World*, ed. Stephen C. Barton (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 111–124; John M. G. Barclay, “Crucifixion as

Consider, then, how Israel responded to God's word in the context of the pluralism of wisdoms in the ANE⁸: "Keep [these statutes] and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people'" (Deut 4:6).⁹ There were other words and gods whom Israel could have followed, yet "Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt . . . and people of all nations came to hear the wisdom of Solomon" (1 Kgs 4:30, 34). This makes Jesus's bold claim even more electric, "Behold, something greater than Solomon is here" (Matt 12:42). Clearly, not all words are created equal: some yield more wisdom than others.¹⁰

In ancient Greek philosophy, the "one and the many" refers to the metaphysical problem of discerning what one thing lies behind everything else, assuming a unified universe.¹¹ The problem this essay seeks to address is a sapiential variation on this problem: is there one way or many ways to live wisely in the world? Contemporary consumerism only exacerbates the problem. For today, as in the second century and ancient Israel, there is a plethora of voices, many of them mutually exclusive, each proclaiming the straight way to the good life. Take, for example, the diverse gospels in our secular society concerning diet, health, and wellness. Everyone wants to eat well, feel well, and be well. When Jacob traveled to visit his uncle, the first

Wisdom: Exploring the Ideology of a Disreputable Social Movement," in *The Wisdom and Foolishness of God: First Corinthians 1–2 in Theological Exploration*, ed. Christophe Chalamet and Hans-Christoph Askani (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 1–20.

⁸ See John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), esp. ch. 13.

⁹ Henceforth, biblical quotations follow the English Standard Version (ESV). On the place of Torah in the ANE literature, see John Walton who argues that Torah has as much to do with wisdom literature as it does a legal code. John H. Walton, *The Lost World of the Torah: Law as Covenant and Wisdom in Ancient Context*, The Lost World Series 6 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019). See also Ryan O'Dowd, *The Wisdom of Torah: Epistemology in Deuteronomy and the Wisdom Literature*, FRLANT 225 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009).

¹⁰ Augustine argues that the fullness of God's wisdom is expressed in his eternally generated and incarnate Word, who is Wisdom from Wisdom as well as Light from Light (*On the Trinity* 1.3 [NPNF¹ 3:5]). See also James D. G. Dunn, "Jesus: Teacher of Wisdom or Wisdom Incarnate?" in Barton, *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?*, 75–92.

¹¹ The problem is determining whether there is *one* thing that lies behind the many things in the universe and, if so, discovering what it is. For instance, ancient philosophers debated whether all is water, air, or fire. See further Michael C. Stokes, *One and Many in Presocratic Philosophy*, Publications of the Center for Hellenic Studies (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).

thing he asked when he arrived was, “Is it well with him?” (Gen 29:6). The Hebrew term is “shalom,” one of the richest and most important terms in the Old Testament. It can apply to either individuals or groups and connotes not simply the absence of conflict, but positive soundness, harmony, and wholeness.¹²

Wellness has become a national obsession—and big business—in the twenty-first century.¹³ Indeed, a handful of scholars suggest that the pursuit of well-being defines our present age, where the “workout ethic” has replaced the Protestant “work ethic.” The Global Wellness Institute (or GWI) is a nonprofit organization whose mission is “to empower wellness worldwide by educating public and private sectors about preventative health and wellness.”¹⁴ The GWI defines wellness as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being.”¹⁵ Who doesn’t want that? Some pharmaceutical companies offer enhancement technologies that promise to make you *better* than well.¹⁶ Yet, experts disagree. They all tout the good news that you can make yourself well by following this or that program. But the programs are all different. Can they all be correct? How shall we therefore decide whose words to follow to become well? Make no mistake: we’re living in an age where there is a plurality of gospels. Welcome to the problem of the one and the many 2.0.¹⁷

The Bible promises both wisdom and wellness (shalom). Psalm 1, a wisdom Psalm, compares a person who lives in accordance with God’s word (“the law of the Lord”) to a tree that prospers and bears fruit. John’s prayer for Gaius (3 John 2) explicitly mentions wellness: “Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, just as it is well with your soul.”¹⁸

Are there multiple ways to get well? In what follows, we’ll first clarify how

¹² “Shalom” can denote general well-being, physical health, or even salvation. See Philip J. Nel, “שָׁלוֹם” *NIDOTTE*, 4:130.

¹³ See, for example, Carl Cederström and André Spicer, *The Wellness Syndrome* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015); also, William Davies, *The Happiness Industry: How the Government and Big Business Sold Us Well-Being* (London: Verso, 2015).

¹⁴ “About Us,” GWI, <https://globalwellnessinstitute.org/about-us>.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ See further, Carl Elliott, *Better than Well: American Medicine Meets the American Dream* (New York: Norton, 2003).

¹⁷ What’s new about the problem is not simply a shift from metaphysics (reality) to epistemology (knowledge), for wisdom involves both. The sapiential problem of the one and the many is that of knowing how to live along the grain of reality in order to flourish rather than perish.

¹⁸ For a contrast between biblical and non-biblical forms of wellness, see Linda Woodhead, “Sophia or Gnosis? Christianity and New Age Spirituality,” in Barton, *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?*, 263–278.

a string of words becomes a worldview. We will then examine what happens to worldviews in our pluralistic age. Having set the stage, I'll then bring out my main thesis, which identifies the major challenge pluralism presents to Christians who are seeking to live and think biblically in this pluralistic age. Next, I'll offer some constructive suggestions for what the church needs to do in order to stay biblical. I conclude with suggestions about the shape Christian discipleship should take if we are to be wise and winsome witnesses in our present pluralistic age.

Worldviews: Whose Map? Which Story?

To begin, then: What is a worldview? Mary Poplin says that worldviews are “like operating systems on a computer except that they are in our minds.”¹⁹ It is a helpful comparison: a worldview provides the instructions that run the program that is our life. If you're more comfortable with cartography than computer science (paper, not plastic!), you can think of a worldview as a map that provides a bird's eye view of the lay of the land, and thus an existential orientation to where you are. Maps provide a frame of reference in light of which you can make decisions about which way to walk to reach your destination. Think of a worldview as a *map to wellness*, a frame of reference that, if you follow it, will lead to human flourishing.²⁰

Worldviews are ways of viewing or getting oriented to reality. Consequently, every worldview has a doctrinal component—a set of assumptions about the basic nature of reality. For example, materialist naturalism is “the belief that all that exists in the world is ultimately reducible to material phenomena.”²¹ One way to define *worldview* is to stress the theoretical aspect, as in “the conceptual lens through which we see, understand, and interpret the world and our place within it.”²² It would be misleading, however, to think that worldviews are purely cognitive. Paul Hiebert, a cultural anthropologist, defines worldview more expansively, as “the foundational cognitive, affective, and evaluative assumptions and frameworks a group of people makes about the nature of reality which they use to order their lives.”²³

¹⁹ Mary Poplin, *Is Reality Secular? Testing the Assumptions of Four Global Worldviews*, Veritas Books 6 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2014), 27.

²⁰ Albert M. Wolters describes worldview as a “guide to life” and suggests it “functions like a compass or road map. It orients us to the world at large, gives us a sense of what is up and what is down, what is right and what is wrong” (*Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005], 5).

²¹ Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 28.

²² Anderson, Clark, and Naugle, *An Introduction to Christian Worldview*, 12.

²³ Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of*

It is important not to over-intellectualize the category of worldview. James Sire, the author of *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog*, admits to having once exaggerated the cognitive dimension. The first three editions of his book treated worldviews as something that can be reduced to a set of philosophical propositions. However, in the fifth edition he provides a broader definition: “A worldview is a commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart, that can be expressed as a story or in a set of presuppositions . . . which we hold (consciously or unconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic constitution of reality, and that provides the foundation on which we live and move and have our being.”²⁴ Put differently, worldviews aren’t for professional philosophers only, nor are they purely conceptual. They are, rather, affairs of the heart, which is to say, the core of human persons, out of which come the issues of life. A worldview is a way of thinking and living that pursues a way of life intended to achieve or maintain wellness in as many domains as possible: physical, financial, psychological, professional, social, and religious. The assumption of the present essay is that our present age, like the second-century, confronts Christians with many conflicting worldviews. For reasons that will soon become apparent, however, the clash has become more acute of late.

Worldviews typically provide answers to four core questions that hover—either in the background or foreground—over the lives of everyone, everywhere, and at all times: (1) Who am I (and what does it mean to be human)? (2) Where am I (and what kind of world do I live in)? (3) What’s wrong with us (and if the human condition is a problem, how can it be solved)? (4) What is the solution?²⁵ Many worldviews address these questions not with a crib sheet of “the answers,” but rather with an overarching story or “metanarrative” that provides a framework of meaning. For example, various forms of material naturalism, such as Darwin’s story of evolution, have become for many moderns their big picture, the true account of how the world that is red in tooth and claw works and came to be the way it is.²⁶

How People Change (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 25–26.

²⁴ James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 5th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 21. Sire is alluding to Paul’s Areopagus speech (Acts 17:28) that cites a line from the Greek poet Epimenides: “For in you we live and move and have our being.” As Roy Clouser has argued, theories about the world and human beings necessarily include at least a tacit appeal to some religious dimension or sense of transcendence. See Roy A. Clouser, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality: An Essay on the Hidden Role of Religious Beliefs in Theories*, rev. ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005).

²⁵ Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 132–133.

²⁶ Naturalistic evolution is one of the main worldview stories in our secular age. See Daniel C. Dennett, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life*

N. T. Wright reads the New Testament authors as answering these four worldview questions too. The whole Bible articulates a worldview in the form of a “control story,” a narrative frame of reference in which Jesus recapitulates and completes the story of Israel (which is also the story of Adam). For Wright, knowledge takes place “when people *find things that fit* with the particular story.”²⁷ Jesus’s story is ultimately God’s story whereby he demonstrates his covenant faithfulness and his victory over evil.²⁸ It is also the story wherein humans discover their own true identity: James 1:22–25 compares the storied worldview of the New Testament to a mirror in which we see ourselves as we truly are. James invites us to view the world, and ourselves, in the mirror of the biblical text, and to be not only hearers but doers of the control story that lies at its heart. Indeed, the difference between wisdom and foolishness is a function of whether we live out the reality we see in Scripture. Even the demons *hear*. *Doing* is therefore the operative term: “Worldviews include a praxis, a way-of-being-in-the-world,”²⁹ a way of being that makes disciples and eventually gives rise to a whole culture.³⁰

Because worldviews fund ways of seeing, judging, and *acting*, I prefer to speak not of metanarratives, but metadramas, control stories *made flesh*. Dramas are stories too, but they are less told than acted out. From birth to death, a person’s life is a story with a beginning, middle, and end, lived out, with others, on the stage of history in the great theater of the world. Drama is, thus, a peculiarly well-suited model for thinking about the nature and function of worldviews. Drama also adds another key worldview question: What’s happening? What’s going on, and what is my role in it?³¹

The notion of a metadrama is also particularly well-suited to expound the Christian worldview, together with its central claim, “And the Word became flesh” (John 1:14). We know what God is like first and foremost because of what he has done in history. He is the one who brought Israel out of Egypt (Exod 20:2) and Jesus from the grave (Acts 13:30). The triune God is the principal actor in the Christian control story. God has also called each human person into being, casting them as characters in his story, a “theodrama” (literally, *God-doing*), equipping them with the gifts they need

(New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995).

²⁷ Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 37.

²⁸ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 2 (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1996).

²⁹ Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 124.

³⁰ On the importance of the Bible’s social imaginary for the project of making disciples, see my *Hearers and Doers: A Pastor’s Guide to Making Disciples through Scripture and Doctrine* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019).

³¹ See further, my *Faith Speaking Understanding: Performing the Drama of Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014).

to fulfill their respective vocations, and demanding that we play our parts fittingly, to God's glory. In brief, being biblical in a pluralistic age requires us to understand the story made flesh, of which we are a part, and to participate rightly, to *contribute*, to this story, forsaking all others. To be human is to be more than a passive observer. There is no alibi for being. Like it or not, each of us is onstage, actors with parts to play, lines to say, and things to do. We act biblically when we make Scripture our control story, the script for the drama that is our life.³²

Earlier, I said that we're all disciples following someone's words towards visions of wellness. We are not in a position to see that the words we follow script our lives. The Bible is more than human words: it is God's word, a *holy script*. It is the divinely authorized account of the drama of the Christ, the story made flesh of what God has done, is doing, and will do in Jesus Christ to restore creation and renew sinners.³³ The Bible answers all of the questions listed above. Who am I? A creature in God's image mired in corruption. Where am I? In God's good creation, with others, mired in corruption. What's wrong with us? We have defaced God's image and defied the Creator; we have transferred our first love to ourselves, rather than to God and neighbor. Where are we going? Well, that depends on your individual story: Is it one of rebellion against God or repentance and renewal in Christ? What's happening? The good news is that God is adopting sinners into his family in Christ, conforming them through the Holy Spirit to be more and more like Christ.³⁴

At the heart of the Christian worldview, then, is gospel: the drama of the Christ. In Christ, God is making all things well. It is this story, this drama made flesh, that Christians everywhere should be living out. Moreover, the gospel is not for Christians only, but the true story of the world, a comprehensive story and public truth that encompasses all nations, not to mention the heavens and the earth. The gospel story is a way of wisdom and wellness, yet it remains counter-cultural, for the wisdom of God is foolishness to other worldviews.³⁵

³² For more on a theatrical approach to Christian theology and ethics, see my *Faith Speaking Understanding*.

³³ See further, my *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), ch. 4.

³⁴ See further, my "The Drama of Discipleship: A Vocation of Spiritual Formation," in *Pictures at a Theological Exhibition: Scenes of the Church's Worship, Witness, and Wisdom*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 180–199.

³⁵ On the relationship of Christ (the wisdom of God) and culture, see H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951). On the Bible's power to subvert and convert worldviews, see Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, esp. ch. 11.

Defining our Pluralistic Age

The easiest way to describe our present pluralist age is to say that there are many stories and multiple scripts that serve as people's frameworks for daily living.³⁶ Many of these have their own tacit version of the gospel, some promise about the wellness we can achieve if only we follow a certain set of beliefs and practices. For example, best-selling author Deepak Chopra believes that he has found a way for people to achieve "perfect health," a condition "that is free from disease, that never feels pain, that cannot age or die."³⁷ Interested? Who wouldn't be? Chopra's genius is to combine New Age mysticism with quantum physics to promote what he calls "quantum healing" (it's a long story). In any case, in our pluralistic age there is a plethora of stories to choose from—many roadmaps to wellness. And, as in the second century, there is a temptation, due to cultural pressure, to pick and choose aspects of several stories and combine them with aspects of the biblical story. This way syncretism, if not madness, lies.³⁸

While there is good reason to be concerned, even alarmed, about the fate of Christianity in our pluralistic age, let me begin by stressing the positives. The pluralism we are experiencing today is not unrelated to Congress's decision in 1791 not to mandate a state religion. Religious pluralism is, in one sense, a logical consequence of the Constitutional right to exercise religious freedom. Christians should be grateful we are not living in an age of empire, where this right is severely curtailed, as in communist China or where one would be forced to worship pagan gods, as in ancient Rome. The plank in the

³⁶ See further, David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1987).

³⁷ Deepak Chopra, *Perfect Health: The Complete Mind/Body Guide*, rev. ed. (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2000), 7.

³⁸ By "syncretism," I am thinking of the phenomenon, seen in Scripture itself, of the people of God diluting or distorting true religion through incorporation of practices and beliefs from non-biblical religions. 2 Kings 17:41 paints a stark and sobering picture of such syncretism: "So these nations feared the Lord *and also served their carved images*" (emphasis mine). More recently, syncretism has been broadened to connote an interpenetration of cultural traditions (see Jerald D. Gort et al., eds., *Dialogue and Syncretism: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, Currents of Encounter 1 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989]). Syncretism should be distinguished from contextualization, which is the attempt to employ cultural concepts and materials to preserve the gospel in new situations. For helpful reflections on how this is to be done, and with what criteria, see Daniel Strange, *Their Rock is Not Like Our Rock: A Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014); also, Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), chs. 1–6.

pluralist platform I can support is the one that refuses to use force to suppress freedom of thought and expression.³⁹

The modest pluralism that ensures religious freedom is in danger of itself becoming an oppressive ideology. In the twenty-first century, more people than ever now live in urban centers in a globalized world where there is a new kind of empire that rules not by armies but by the hegemony of popular culture. It is my firm conviction that culture—by which I mean everything that is done not by reflex—is the most powerful means of worldview (including spiritual) formation there is.⁴⁰ For example, TV shows have made certain lifestyles socially acceptable by representing them with winsome characters. The new empire—call it the popular cultural industrial entertainment complex—uses social media to sell not goods but lifestyles. Video has become a weapon of mass instruction.⁴¹

Our pluralistic age has its own pathologies. First, it fosters a spirit of consumerism. Because there are so many paths to the good life, we have to choose between them. The religious pluralism associated with John Hick sees religions as different “brands,” as it were, of what is essentially the same product: the Eternal One. No one religion has a monopoly on religious truth because, for Hick, all religions accomplish the same thing: They help free people from self-centeredness to reality-centeredness.⁴² Pluralism is here a centripetal force: what at first glance appears to be diversity between various religions upon closer inspection is seen to be merely variations on a single sacred theme.

A second pathology of our pluralistic age is its tendency to foster a spirit of cynicism. I’m thinking, for example, of François Lyotard’s description of

³⁹ On the Constitution and religious freedom in the United States, see Frank Lambert, *The Founding Fathers and the Place of Religion in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), chs. 9 and 10; also, Thomas S. Kidd, *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), ch. 7.

⁴⁰ See further, my “That’s the Spirit! Or, What Exactly does Spiritual Formation Form? Towards a Theological Formulation of a Biblical Answer,” in Gerald Hiestand and Todd Wilson, eds., *Tending Soul, Mind, and Body: The Art and Science of Spiritual Formation*, Center for Pastors Theologians Series 4 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019).

⁴¹ On the mass media as a source of worldview and spiritual formation, see, among others, Deborah A. Macey, Kathleen M. Ryan, and Noah J. Springer, eds., *How Television Shapes our Worldview: Media Representations of Social Trends and Change* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014); also, Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, 20th ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2005); and, Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, ed. W. Terrence Gordon, critical ed. (Berkeley: Gingko Press, 2003).

⁴² John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), chs. 14–16.

the postmodern condition as “incredulity towards metanarratives.”⁴³ Pluralism here acts as a centrifugal force that prevents people from settling on any one worldview as the truth. It is probably no accident that millennials, along with Generations X and Z (perhaps the first truly post-Christian generation), make up the bulk of the so-called “nones” (those who profess no religion whatsoever), some 23% of America’s adult population.⁴⁴ They are skittish not only about religious institutions, but also about worldviews: Who, the nones wonder, is in a position to know the answer to those core questions about who we are and where we’re going? Where are the epistemological alchemists who can turn the dross of relative opinion into the gold of absolute knowledge?

It has become increasingly obvious that we’re living in a polarized society where ignorant armies clash by tweets. The deeper problem is that our culture is anti-culture. By this I mean to say that our society does not appear to believe that there is any one way of being human that is superior to all others, nor that there are any universal human qualities that everyone should seek to cultivate. Human being has instead become an empty canvas, in which individuals are invited to create their own portraits: abstract art made flesh. Parents are even choosing names that could work for boys or girls, so that children can make their own choices about gender identity. The only thing our culture is sure it wants to preserve is freedom of choice. Yet, freedom without form is a vacuum, not a vocation.⁴⁵

How Our Pluralistic Age Makes Being Biblical Harder

What happened to biblical authority, that is, the use of Scripture as our control story, in a pluralistic age? Two events are especially noteworthy, each an element in a Copernican Revolution as concerns Christianity. The first is the “great reversal” in biblical hermeneutics in the eighteenth century and the concomitant loss of biblical literacy and civilization. The second is the “great displacement,” namely the substitution of a secular social imaginary in place

⁴³ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

⁴⁴ See further, James Emery White, *The Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2014) and *Meet Generation Z: Understanding and Reaching the New Post-Christian World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017).

⁴⁵ See Martin Luther’s classic statement from his 1520 treatise *The Freedom of a Christian*: “A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to every one” (in Timothy F. Lull and William R. Russell, eds., *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, 3rd ed. [Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2012], 596). Later in the treatise Luther connects Christian freedom with the Christian vocation to participate in Christ’s kingship and priesthood (606–608).

of the biblical that began in earnest in the twentieth century and continues apace.

The Great Reversal in Biblical Hermeneutics

Two Yale theologians, Hans Frei and George Lindbeck, have each in his own way called attention to a fateful revolution in the manner Christians read their Bible. What Frei terms the “eclipse” of biblical narrative happened in the context of early modern academic debates over biblical hermeneutics.⁴⁶ Previously, Christians accepted the biblical narrative as the true story of the world, and used the Bible as their framework of understanding (i.e., metanarrative) to interpret the world and their own experience. However, the biblical criticism of the Enlightenment led to a reversal of the interpretive polarities: modern men and women became more inclined to accept the story told by the natural and social sciences than by Scripture. Accordingly, modern learning became the template through which they read the Bible. Instead of fitting the real world into a biblical framework, modern thinkers tried to fit the biblical story into the “real world” known independently of the biblical text.⁴⁷ Whereas knowledge for earlier Christians was a matter of fitting their world into the world of the Bible, modern scholars are more likely to fit the Bible’s story into their critically reconstructed historical reality.

This great reversal—the replacement of the biblical metanarrative by something else—was a stupendous development. Lindbeck says that our loss of the ability to use the biblical story as our frame of reference for understanding our world “is perhaps a more serious part of the global crisis than are the social, economic, and political problems to which we more commonly advert,”⁴⁸ and he’s not even an evangelical! Lindbeck is right: the change from using the Bible as the lens through which we look at the world, to using worldly knowledge as the lens through which we inspect the Bible, is as radical a revolution as Copernicus’s discovery that the earth revolves around the sun rather than vice versa. The tragedy is that this “great reversal” gets things backwards, thus falling prey to a great confusion. As C. S. Lewis says: “Christian theology can fit in science, art, morality, and the sub-Christian religions. The scientific point of view cannot fit in any of these things, not even science itself. I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen:

⁴⁶ See Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980).

⁴⁷ George A. Lindbeck calls for a reversal of this modern reversal: “Intratextual theology redescribes reality within the scriptural framework rather than translating Scripture into extrascriptural categories. It is the text, so to speak, which absorbs the world, rather than the world the text” (*The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Society in a Postliberal Age* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1984], 118).

⁴⁸ George Lindbeck, “Barth and Textuality,” *Theology Today* 43.3 (1986): 372.

not only because I see it but because by it I see everything else.”⁴⁹ One cannot serve two master narratives, therefore choose you this day whose you will serve.

Grant Wacker’s essay “The Demise of Biblical Civilization” completes the story, explaining how what began as a scholarly reversal came to seep into the popular mindset. Wacker claims that during the twentieth century, the average American did not as much renounce the Bible as simply stop using it as the primary plausibility structure with which to make sense of the world. People tended to understand the meaning of events in terms of the this-worldly historical process rather than in terms of divine providence: “The assumption that historical process is the bed of human perception . . . had come to be the hallmark of the modern mind.”⁵⁰ The demise of biblical civilization, in other words, was a failure of the imagination to read our world in terms of God’s word.

The Secularized Social Imaginary

Underlying the great reversal, and the demise of biblical civilization, is what Charles Taylor terms the social imaginary in his book *A Secular Age*. A social imaginary is the picture that frames and makes sense of our everyday beliefs and practices, the “way people imagine their social existence.”⁵¹ A social imaginary is that nest of background assumptions, often implicit, that lead people to feel things as right or wrong, correct or incorrect. It is “the way ordinary people ‘imagine’ their social surrounds . . . expressed not in theoretical terms, but carried in images [and] stories.”⁵² It is another name for the root metaphor (or root narrative) that shapes a person’s perception of the world, undergirds her worldview, and funds her plausibility structure. For example, the root metaphor of “world as machine” generates a very different picture than “world as organism.” Socrates said “Know thyself,” but today we need to add an amendment: “Know thy culture,” or even better, “Know thy worldview, and the root metaphor that generates and governs it.”⁵³

⁴⁹ C. S. Lewis, “Is Theology Poetry?” in *The Weight of Glory: And Other Addresses*, Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2001), 140.

⁵⁰ Grant Wacker, “The Demise of Biblical Civilization,” in *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History*, ed. Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 125.

⁵¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 171.

⁵² Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Public Planet Books (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 23.

⁵³ I explore the importance of the social imaginary, and the imagination in general, for church and theology in my “The Discarded Imagination: Metaphors by Which a Holy Nation Lives,” in *Pictures at a Theological Exhibition*, 17–46.

A social imaginary is not a theory—the creation of intellectuals—but a storied way of thinking. It is the taken-for-granted story of the world assumed and passed on by a society’s characteristic language, pictures, and practices. Social imaginaries are not taught in universities, but caught as people engage culture (recall Taylor’s point about their being “carried in images, stories, and legends”). People become secular not by taking classes in Secularity 101, but simply by participating in a society that no longer refers to God the way it used to. This is part and parcel of the spiritually formative power of culture to which I alluded earlier.⁵⁴

Social imaginaries are the metaphors and stories by which we live, the images and narratives that orient everyday life and indoctrinate us.⁵⁵ Yes, we have all been indoctrinated: filled with doctrine or teaching. The doctrines we hold, be they philosophical, political, or theological, feel right or wrong, plausible or implausible, based largely on how well they accord with the prevailing social imaginary. Our age is secular because it is held captive by a secular picture, a secularized social imaginary. The idols of the contemporary social imaginary are often hidden in plain sight. Steve Wilkens and Mark Sanford have written a book, *Hidden Worldviews*, in which they alert Christians to the subtle ways worldviews often work: “These lived worldviews are popular philosophies of life that have few intellectual proponents but vast numbers of practitioners.”⁵⁶ The church becomes worldly when it allows itself to be affected by things like individualism, consumerism, moral relativism, and other cultural stories that are currently being lived out in contemporary society.

Taylor uses the term “immanent frame” to describe the broad secular (i.e., this-worldly) story for interpreting the world. Life gets its meaning not from something transcendent (beyond the world), but only from nature itself—matter in motion; evolutionary development. Taylor characterizes our age as having a “disenchanted” worldview that sees the world as a closed system of nature, with no room for supernatural grace. The loss of a biblical worldview and the demise of biblical civilization were, tellingly, not the result of some scientific discovery or logical argument, but rather of a tectonic shift in those taken-for-granted assumptions that frame our everyday beliefs and

⁵⁴ James K. A. Smith makes a similar point in calling attention to the formative power on the social imagination of what he terms “cultural liturgies.” See his *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, Cultural Liturgies 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), esp. ch. 2.

⁵⁵ See the classic work by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

⁵⁶ Steve Wilkens and Mark L. Sanford, *Hidden Worldviews: Eight Cultural Stories That Shape Our Lives* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009).

practices. If our pluralistic age presents a crisis for faith, it is because it has replaced the *scriptural* imaginary with some *secular* counterpart.⁵⁷

This is not the place to take inventory of all the control stories that have taken Scripture's place in our society. Let me mention just two variations on a common secular theme. The first story is about modernity's "coming of age." The philosopher Kant answered his own question, also the title of his famous 1784 lecture "What is Enlightenment?" by saying that it is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. We become enlightened when we throw off the shackles of authoritative tradition and dare to reason for ourselves.⁵⁸ The second story is told by any number of modern thinkers who appropriate what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13:11 for their own ideological agendas: "When I was a child, I spoke like a child [about God], I thought like a child [listening to biblical stories], I reasoned like a child [theologically]. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways [Christianity]."⁵⁹

If the first story that has colonized modernity's social imagination makes reason the hero, the second enshrines freedom. Yet, both stories buy into the myth of progress where the happily-ever-after ending follows the defeat of various forms of social oppression, including Christianity's emphasis on a created order and an exclusive Savior. What continues to grip the popular imagination is this modern emancipation narrative, namely, the story that human fulfillment consists in a march towards greater and greater individual autonomy. In this emancipatory social imaginary, freedom is largely freedom *from*, not freedom *for*. The meaning of the freedom moderns value is now a function of the secular rather than the scriptural social imaginary. What modern people mean when they say, "Let freedom reign" is not what Paul meant when he declared "For freedom Christ has set us free" (Gal 5:1).

In short, what it means to be well in modernity—a grown-up who has been set free for free-thinking, free-spending, and free-living—is quite different from the wellness proclaimed by the gospel.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ For an example of how some pastors are reading and responding to Taylor's influential work, see Collin Hansen, ed., *Our Secular Age: Ten Years of Reading and Applying Charles Taylor* (Deerfield, IL: The Gospel Coalition, 2017).

⁵⁸ See Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals: And, What is Enlightenment?*, trans. Lewis White Beck (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997).

⁵⁹ See, for example, Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006); also, in the spirit of Kant, see Luc Ferry, *A Brief History of Thought: A Philosophical Guide to Living*, Learning to Live (New York: HarperCollins, 2011).

⁶⁰ For interrogations of modernity and the freedom it promised but failed to deliver, see J. Andrew Kirk, *The Future of Reason, Science, and Faith: Following Modernity and Post-Modernity* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2016); also, Stephen N. Williams, *Revelation and Reconciliation: A Window on Modernity* (Cambridge:

Being Biblical: Revive Us—Especially Our Imaginations!—Again

If a secularized social imaginary indeed lies at the root of our contemporary pluralistic age, what should Christians do about it? Philosophical arguments about the coherence, comprehensiveness, and existential adequacy of worldviews still matter, to be sure. Yet, it is also the case that we need to deal with worldview problems at their source, which I am suggesting is the social imaginary.⁶¹

Bearing Christian witness involves more than winning arguments. Christian apologists need to do more than establish particular facts.⁶² To be sure, historical arguments for things like the bodily resurrection remain an important part of the defense of Christian faith, but they are not enough on their own. If the fundamental problem is a secularized social imaginary, then we need change the fundamental story people tell to understand God, the world, and themselves. The pressing challenge is to change the software: the programming or root metaphor by which they process their experience and bits of information. To do so, we need to evangelize the secular social imaginary.

Alas, too many Christians are themselves suffering from malnourished imaginations, captive to culturally conditioned pictures of the good life that trade on celebrity, wealth, and social power.⁶³ Many professing Christians *want* to believe the Bible—in fact, they *do* believe it and are even prepared to defend doctrinal truth—yet, they nevertheless find themselves unable to see or feel their world in biblical terms (“I believe; help my unbelief!” Mark 9:24). They consequently experience a disturbing disconnect between the world they actually inhabit and the world of the biblical text whose truth they confess. Their professions of faith are out of whack with their lived practices.⁶⁴

Cambridge University Press, 1995); and John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).

⁶¹ Fortunately, some Christian apologists are acknowledging the significance of culture—including popular culture—and the imagination. See, for example, Ted Turnau, *Popologetics: Popular Culture in Christian Perspective* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2012); also, Holly Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination: An Integrated Approach to Defending the Faith*, Living Faith Series (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2017).

⁶² Again, there are encouraging developments that the conception of what is involved in apologetics has broadened of late from evidential and logical argumentation to whole-person witness. See, for example, Joshua D. Chatraw and Mark D. Allen, *Apologetics at the Cross: An Introduction for Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018); also, Paul M. Gould, Travis Dickinson, and R. Keith Loftin, *Stand Firm: Apologetics and the Brilliance of the Gospel* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2018).

⁶³ See further, my “The Discarded Imagination.”

⁶⁴ The outstanding example is the failure of the church consistently and suffi-

If faith's influence is waning, as the pollsters insist, then it is largely because of a failure of the evangelical imagination to connect the biblical and cultural dots.⁶⁵ Pastors are on the front line of the social imaginary ways, and they can help by reminding their congregations again and again what the Bible is and what it is for.⁶⁶

Here, then, is my recommendation for how to be biblical in a pluralistic age: we must retrieve the principle of *sola scriptura* not simply as a Reformation slogan that pertains to criteria for right doctrine, but as the rule for rightly imagining reality—God, the world, and ourselves.⁶⁷ *Sola Scriptura* reminds us that *Scripture alone* should exercise supreme authority over Christian faith and life, including the imagination. Christians also need to recover the Bible as their control story, not only of their official theology, but also of everyday Christian life and thought. Pastors, theologians, apologists, and evangelists need to do everything they can to ensure that Scripture alone rules the congregational imagination. The hope is that local churches would then act as leaven in the larger social loaf.⁶⁸

The point is worth repeating: secular culture is in the full-time business of indoctrination and spiritual formation, but what it is forming is consumerist and pluralist spirits, not hearts and minds captive to Jesus Christ and his kingdom. The first step in being biblical in a pluralistic age is to acknowledge the many voices competing to form the social imaginary.⁶⁹ The gospel is not simply one more story. It is, rather, the dramatic announcement that God has raised Jesus from the dead, an announcement that subverts the worldly wisdom of the world and sets the captive imagination free.⁷⁰ This “evangelically

ciently to bear witness to racial reconciliation. See further, Michael O. Emerson and Christia Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁶⁵ See *Barna Trends 2018: What's New and What's Next at the Intersection of Faith and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017).

⁶⁶ It is worth pointing out that, in doing so, the pastor exercises a theological vocation. See Kevin J. Vanhoozer and Owen Strachan, *The Pastor as Public Theologian: Reclaiming a Lost Vision* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015).

⁶⁷ For a proposal to retrieve not only *sola scriptura* but the other Reformation *solas* as well, see my *Biblical Authority after Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016), esp. ch. 3.

⁶⁸ For a good example of what this might involve, see Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), esp. chs. 2–5.

⁶⁹ It is also worth mentioning again in this context the importance of James K. A. Smith's work on cultural liturgies, and his companion book, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016).

⁷⁰ N. T. Wright makes this point forcefully in his *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking*

cal” imagination—an imagination ruled by the story of the gospel—frees us to see, judge, and act in faith, in accordance with the way things really are rather than the way secular science, Hollywood, or Madison Avenue say they are. It is all these other words—all that disorienting noise in contemporary culture—that best deserves to be called vain imaginings, not Scripture.⁷¹ The biblically transformed imagination alone opens up the possibility of living along the grain of reality, in accordance with what is really the case “in Christ”: the new creational kingdom of God.

Metaphors with staying power, such as the church as “the body of Christ” (1 Cor 12:27), are models that structure our thinking and experience. One of my favorite metaphors for the church is “holy nation” (1 Pet 2:9).⁷² As a holy nation of “elect exiles” (1 Pet 1:1), the church is charged with demonstrating the reality of God’s reign on earth as it is in heaven.⁷³ The church, precisely because it is a holy nation and company of the gospel, marches to the beat of a different social imaginary. Its worship, witness, and wisdom are distinct, inasmuch as they take their bearings from what God was doing in Jesus Christ. In a disenchanted age, local churches ought to attract attention as peopled places where scenes of reconciliation are regularly played out. It may be easy to dismiss arguments, but a community that lives out the grace and truth of Jesus Christ is hard to ignore.⁷⁴

Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), especially chs. 3 and 6.

⁷¹ Here we may recall Christian’s encounter with Vanity Fair in John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*.

⁷² Paul S. Minear identifies more than ninety images of the church in the New Testament, with *body of Christ* being a “major image” and *holy nation* deemed a “minor image” (*Images of the Church in the New Testament* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960]).

⁷³ Richard B. Hays suggests that “new creation” is a focal image in New Testament ethics, and that “*The church embodies the power of the resurrection in the midst of a not-yet-redeemed world*” (*The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* [New York: HarperCollins, 1996], 198).

⁷⁴ The most famous appeal to the life of the Christian community is probably the second-century “Epistle to Diognetus”: “Christians are not distinguished from the rest of mankind by either country, speech, or customs. . . . Certainly, this creed of theirs is no discovery due to some fancy or speculation of inquisitive men. . . . Yet, while they dwell in both Greek and non-Greek cities . . . and conform to the customs of the country in dress, food, and mode of life in general, the whole tenor of their way of living stamps it as worthy of admiration and admittedly extraordinary. They reside in their respective countries, but only as aliens. . . . Every foreign land is their home, and every home a foreign land. They marry like all others and beget children; but they do not expose their offspring. Their board they spread for all, but not their bed. They find themselves *in the flesh*, but do not live *according to the flesh*. They spend their days on earth, but hold citizenship in heaven.” (emphasis mine) *The Didache*, Ancient Chris-

Being biblical, I have been arguing, involves more than thinking, more even than orthodoxy. Christians must not be like those who look into the mirror of Scripture and then forget what they see, hearers (and thinkers!) but not doers (Jas 1:22–25). If they are to grow in the faith and communicate it to others, Christians must learn to inhabit the story of the Bible as well.⁷⁵ They need to hear and to do—to indwell as whole embodied persons—the strange new story-world of the Bible. To fail in this vocation is to reinforce the popular stereotype of Christians as earnest moral-therapeutic desists.⁷⁶

Consider for a moment the CBS television sitcom comedy, “Living Biblically,” which premiered in 2017 and was based on a book by A. J. Jacobs, *A Year of Living Biblically: One Man’s Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible* (mercifully it was cancelled after only one season). The show followed the adventures of a man who, after the death of his best friend, decided to improve his life by living according to the Bible. Each episode was named after a particular commandment (e.g., “Thou shalt not steal”) and effectively reinforced popular stereotypes of Bible-thumping literalists. The series gave the overall impression that living biblically is a matter of following the moral principles of the Bible, many of which are culturally irrelevant, or just weird. Nowhere does the show acknowledge that living biblically primarily means not following moral prescriptions but participating in a holy script, a drama of redemption in which we participate in what the Father is doing in the Son through the Spirit to renew creation and restore right relationships.⁷⁷

The church needs to do more than practice morality. We need to live biblically, and this means becoming a holy nation. At its best, the church community does so when it indwells the biblical story, thus becoming a living plausibility structure for the truth of the gospel and a living parable of the kingdom. It is hard to laugh off a community that lives out reconciliation in Christ—especially when such reconciliation crosses ethnic and class boundaries, something the secular control story has still not managed to bring about.

tian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation 6, ed. Johannes Quasten and Joseph C. Plumpe, trans. James A. Kleist (New York: Paulist Press, 1948), 138–139.

⁷⁵ This is a major theme of my *Faith Speaking Understanding* (136–138) where I argue that drama is story or narrative *made flesh*. Christians mature as they drill deeper into their identity in Christ.

⁷⁶ This is Christian Smith’s term for those who are nominally Christian, but in fact practice a sub-Christian moral form of religion centered on feeling good. See Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁷⁷ Hays argues that the task of reading the text carefully and placing it in canonical context must be followed by the hermeneutical task of relating the text to our contemporary context and the pragmatic task of “living the text” (see his *Moral Vision*, 5–7).

The aim of a Christian worldview is not simply truth, but wisdom and shalom, personal and global wellness. Lesslie Newbigin says the best hermeneutic of the gospel is “a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it.”⁷⁸ Could we not add that the best apologetic of the gospel is a congregation who in their life together exhibit its truth, goodness, and beauty? Paul Gould rightly sees a cultural dimension to the task of Christian apologetics: We need both to understand the formative power of culture on the Christian imagination and to display within culture the Christian story in such a way that it responds to deep-seated human longings for truth, goodness, and beauty alike.⁷⁹ Make no mistake: this is more demanding than producing logically valid arguments. The ultimate aim of living biblically is both evangelistic and apologetic. It involves proclaiming, putting on, and then practicing, in fear and trembling, with the help of God’s grace, the righteousness of Christ.⁸⁰ The ultimate aim of living biblically is to render every local church a dynamic and compelling dramatic exhibit of the lived truth and desirability of the gospel. It is up to local churches to make “living biblically” something more than a tired sitcom. Before we can bear witness in our society, however, we have to put in order the social imaginary of our own house.

*Conclusion: Five Theses on Being Biblical, Discipleship,
and the Dialogical Virtues*

To sum up: I’ve acknowledged that we live in a pluralistic age with many paths to wellness and wisdom. In the companion piece, I will discuss how pluralism in the academy raises its own challenges as to being biblical. My concern in the present essay has been with pluralism in contemporary culture, and the challenge pluralism represents for Christian discipleship. We saw that the sheer plurality of worldviews wearies the soul and makes it harder to believe in any one of them. In response, I claimed that the church needs to redeem the social imaginary by retrieving the biblical narrative as the true story of the world and the supreme authority for Christian thought and life. Finally, I suggested that to help make the Christian story stick, and to affect the broader social imagination, Christians have not only to talk about it but

⁷⁸ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 227.

⁷⁹ See further, Paul M. Gould, *Cultural Apologetics: Renewing the Christian Voice, Conscience, and Imagination in a Disenchanted World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019).

⁸⁰ See further, my “Being in Christ: Ontology, Topology, and the Church as Eutopic Theater,” *CTR* 13.1 (2015): 3–22.

to live it out—to enact the drama of redemption in local congregations.⁸¹

Acknowledging plurality—that not everyone reads the gospel in the same way, for example—is one thing; pluralism—the ideology that every faith is as good as every other—quite another. Newbigin helps us to see the difference: “I . . . believe that a Christian must welcome some measure of plurality but reject pluralism.”⁸² As Christians who want to be biblical in a pluralistic age, we must understand, and preserve, this distinction between plurality and pluralism.

I conclude with five theses on bearing biblical Christian witness in a pluralistic age. First: being biblical means obeying the Great Commission. Jesus commands us to make disciples of every nation. The good news in Jesus Christ is not for one tribe only, but for the whole world. There is wellness in no one else. We need to give more thought about how to respond to the Great Commission in ways that evangelize the social imaginary. To make disciples, we must take every social imaginary captive.

Second: being biblical in a pluralistic age means obeying the Great Commandment.⁸³ To love others as ourselves means sharing the truth of the gospel with others. It means speaking the truth of the gospel in love, and loving the truth we speak. In speaking truth, we will have to call out falsehood, and this means casting down cleverly devised cultural myths about wellness. We do so because we believe these ways lead not to fulfillment but frustration.

Third: being biblical in a pluralistic age means adhering to the Golden Rule—treating religious and even secular others the way you would want to be treated by them. This was the gist of the recommendations for conduct set forth in the Cape Town Commitment, a statement produced by the Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization held in South Africa in 2010. The statement poignantly advises: “Love your neighbor as yourself’ includes persons of other faiths” and, presumably, persons of no faith. The plausibility of our witness is directly related to the “pleasability” or winsomeness of our witness. Our goal is to make disciples, not to force people to convert to Christianity. Our gospel witness includes both what we say and how we say it.⁸⁴

Fourth: being biblical involves not simply believing the gospel but exhibiting characteristics of citizens of the gospel, especially convictional civility,

⁸¹ I have tried to do this myself in *Hearers and Doers*, where I call out the false pictures of wellness that hold captive our society and contrast them with the gospel.

⁸² Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 244.

⁸³ See Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus's Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006).

⁸⁴ I argue for the cruciform or martyrological nature of Christian Witness in “The Trials of Truth: Mission, Martyrdom & the Epistemology of the Cross,” in *First Theology: God, Scripture, Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2002), 337–373.

that oh-so-challenging blend of boldness and humility, without which civil disagreement is impossible: “Civility obliges citizens in a pluralistic society to take great care in using words.”⁸⁵ Christians need to be more than merely civil: they must display the virtues commensurate with being citizens of the gospel. This includes a number of characteristics, such as intelligent listening and respecting those with whom we disagree. The Williamsburg Charter (1988) makes a similar point: “Those who claim the right to criticize should assume the responsibility to comprehend.”⁸⁶

Finally, being biblical in a pluralistic age may ultimately mean being a martyr: A witness who speaks the truth in love and is willing, if necessary, to suffer for this witness. It takes a certain kind of people to be biblical in a pluralistic age. I’ve alluded to the importance of the dialogical virtues—characteristics that enable good listening and effective communication—but we can also speak of the sapiential virtues, personal characteristics and habits that make of one’s whole life a witness to gospel truth and the wisdom of the Cross.⁸⁷

Whose words are we living out? Which script are we enacting? Paul exhorts his Philippian audience, “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus” (Phil 2:5), and this is a good summary of my five theses. Being biblical means learning how to embody the mind of Christ to everywhere, to everyone, and at all times. “Have this mind among yourselves”—for the love of God and our pluralistic world. Being biblical in a pluralistic age virtually guarantees that our performance as Christians will stand out, not because we are great actors, but because of the great story to which our words and deeds bear witness and continue to make flesh.

⁸⁵ Os Guinness, *The Case for Civility: And Why Our Future Depends on It* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 188.

⁸⁶ The Williamsburg Charter may be found in Guinness, *The Case for Civility*, 177–198.

⁸⁷ See further my essay, “Sapiential Apologetics: The Dramatic Demonstration of Gospel Truth,” in *Pictures at a Theological Exhibition*, 217–250.