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WORLDVIEW AWARENESS— NOT JUST FOR MISSIONARIES ANYMORE

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For centuries most people throughout the West shared core assumptions shaped by a common Christian heritage and the modernity of the Enlightenment. Christian assumptions are now the exception rather than the rule in most of society, however. The West is transitioning rapidly to a postmodern, post-Christian era. Postmodernism has increasingly become the assumed worldview of anyone younger than 40. In addition to this change, the increase in cross-cultural interaction has brought people with fundamentally different worldviews to the doorsteps of the West.

Christians in the West now live in a world like the one to which missionaries have gone for hundreds of years, shaped without the presumptions of biblical ideas or classic Western culture. Western believers can profit from some of the same training on worldview that missionaries to the non-Western world have long received. These principles are effective in sharing Christ in an increasingly diverse world.

What Is a Worldview? A worldview is a person's fundamental assumptions about how the world is put together and his or her role in it. Worldview affects ideas, feelings, and values. It includes: how a person views himself or herself (e.g., Am I significant individually or because of my family?), other people (e.g., When I meet a person of a certain ethnic group, am I immediately suspicious of them or happy to meet them?), the natural and supernatural world (e.g., Are diseases caused by germs or demons?), cause and effect (e.g., Are car accidents inevitable because God willed them or could they have been prevented?), space (e.g., How close should I stand to a person I'm talking with at a party?), time (e.g., How late is "late" to any particular function?), right and wrong (e.g., How many personal photocopies can I make at work before I'm stealing?), beauty and aesthetics (e.g., Do I prefer guitar or organ music?), and how reality is classified and organized (e.g., Is a chimpanzee more like a person or more like an insect?).

A worldview is like water to a fish: it is implicit, taken for granted. We rarely think about our worldview, but it forms a framework that organizes our world, guides our behavior, and provides emotional security. It is the matrix for our assumption that everything is as it is "because that's just the way the world is!" As Paul Hiebert notes, "People believe that the world really is the way they see it. Rarely are they aware of the fact that the way they see it is molded by their world view."¹

Models of and for Life. One of the most significant insights into worldviews for effective evangelism is that worldviews are models of life and for life; in other words, to the one who holds it, a worldview describes the way things are and prescribes the way a person should think, feel, and act.² Clifford Geertz explains how these two functions of a worldview work together: "On the one hand, [a worldview] objectivizes moral and aesthetic preferences by depicting them...as mere common sense given the unalterable shape of reality. On the other, it supports these received beliefs about [reality] by invoking deeply felt moral and aesthetic sentiments as experiential evidence for their truth."³

For example, because worldviews are models of life and for life:

- Jehovah's Witnesses proudly highlight the "logic" of Witness theology and the spiritual discipline of Witness practice.
- Mormons hold to a theology that gives them the possibility of godhood and live according to what they perceive to be the strongest family structure in the land.

- Muslims affirm the universal unity of faith of the *ummah* (community of Muslims), the straightforward clarity of monadic monotheism, and the directives of Islam for daily life.

People's worldviews order the way they see the world. Their worldviews, in turn, give them a smug sense that they are right and that those who hold a different worldview are wrong. This sense of "rightness" ("smugness") is not a valid test of truth, of course; nevertheless, people live their lives based on it.

More than Cognitive Commitment. A second insight into worldviews that contributes to effective evangelism is that they include more than cognitive understanding. People do not hold to their worldviews for purely rational reasons. Individual beliefs within a worldview fit into a larger system of value, acceptance, self-identity, purpose, and a person's place in the world. Commitment to a worldview is tightly integrated with the elements in that system.

This means that it is possible to demonstrate logically that a non-Christian's worldview is inadequate without affecting his or her ultimate commitment to that worldview. Rarely will a person change an entire belief system or even an individual belief based on logical argument alone, because a person's worldview goes far deeper than cognitive structures. It involves a thorough integration with the larger system.

I recently met a friend whom I had not seen since we were in high school. Five minutes into our conversation he told me that he had become a Jehovah's Witness, abandoning the evangelical faith of his childhood. I began sharing with him some of the serious problems in Watchtower theology and practice, but my friend was unmoved. He explained that, during his late-teen years, he had slipped into the drug culture. It was only when he met some Jehovah's Witnesses who cared for him and helped him establish patterns of discipline that he was able to break free and live a "clean" life. Nothing I could say about the inconsistencies and problems in Witness theology and practice could dent the new worldview commitments that he had forged in his personal life crisis. He now had a huge degree of personal security tied up in the Jehovah's Witness worldview, and discussion of the Greek text of John 1:1 or the real meaning of "firstborn" in Colossians 1:15 left him unmoved.

Listen and Learn. How should these insights into worldview influence the way we do evangelism? First, they remind us of the importance of listening to and learning from people in order to present Christ in the most meaningful way *to them*. Geertz observes that worldviews are synthesized in "sacred symbols,"⁴ and that it is possible for outsiders to understand worldviews that are different from their own by exploring those symbols intimately. By experiencing the deepest and most meaningful moments of a culture, an outsider can comprehend the way that culture lives. To understand people who hold a radically different worldview, we must accompany them to the most meaningful events of their lives. We must ask deep and genuine questions about the things that matter most to them. We must attempt to learn and understand all that we can about their entire worldview, not to argue against individual points within it, but to be able to relate to them as *whole people*. Only then will we be able to communicate the credibility of our alternative worldview rather than simply offer a few new beliefs.

I was a missionary in Ethiopia for 19 years and often shared my faith with members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC). Prayer to the saints and angels is a central part of spiritual life for most members of the EOC, but seldom would my quoting 1 Timothy 2:5 ("For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" [NIV]) make much of an impact on them. It was only after studying the EOC's unique view of the deity and humanity of Christ—one of the sacred symbols of the church—that I began to understand their view of the role of saints and angels in the church. Only after spending long hours listening to and learning from Ethiopian Orthodox priests and laypeople was I able to show them with empathy and effectiveness that Jesus is the only way to God.

A second way these insights into worldview can influence the way we do evangelism is by reminding us of the importance of engaging hearts as well as heads. For most worldviews (including the postmodern worldview in the West), relational proof is more valuable than logical proof. We may demonstrate a truth

in apologetics by applying the law of noncontradiction, yet fail to make any impact or impression on the person with whom we are speaking. To make such an impact, we must also demonstrate the truth of Christ *with our lives*. Put differently, it is not enough to share our knowledge with people; we must share ourselves, because worldviews are a combination of cognitive belief, emotional commitment, and a sense of what is “right.” We can affect a person’s worldview as much by our personal concern as by our cognitive disproof of their particular faith.

A couple of years ago I was talking with a Jewish evangelist—a Messianic Jew who is in his 60s. He lamented that he didn’t know how to witness to Jews of the next generation. “All my evangelism has been built around proving that Jesus is the Messiah. But I share my apologetic proofs with young Jews and they say, ‘That’s nice for you, but it’s not for me.’ They are far more concerned with relationships than with any of the proofs I can offer them.” Like these young Jews, many postmoderns long for the validation of truth with life because their worldview teaches them that truth is known experientially, not just cognitively. In order to reach those who think this way, we need not abandon propositional truth, as many postmoderns suggest, but we must acknowledge that logical arguments are seldom enough to persuade, especially with postmoderns. Their notion of truth, whether right or wrong, must inform the way we approach them.

Again, worldviews are tightly integrated, more-than-cognitive models of life and for life. Worldview awareness reminds us, then, that spending time with people will open their hearts. Relationships built on trust eventually bring mutual understanding of worldview commitments. The more different a person is, the more sharing your faith demands that you cultivate a relationship with that person so that you can understand and influence his or her worldview effectively.

— Steve Strauss

NOTES

- 1 Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 45.
- 2 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (n.p.: Basic Books, 1973), 93.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 90.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 89.