

Lesson 3

Defining Worldviews

Based on Lecture 2 of

Greg L. Bahnsen's *Basic Training for Defending the Faith*

“For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things.

To Him be the glory forever. Amen. (Romans 11:36)

In his first lecture, Dr. Bahnsen points out the impossibility of neutrality in human thought. He argues that no one is—or even *can* be—neutral when approaching issues such as the existence of God and the creation of the universe. Neutrality is impossible according to *both* careful philosophical method *and* to sound biblical study (exegesis). That is, both reason and Scripture underscore the myth of neutrality.

Furthermore, Dr. Bahnsen argues that as a Christian you *shouldn't* even attempt neutrality. Many Christians attempt an “unbiased” approach in the hope of establishing neutral ground upon which to reason with the unbeliever. When they do so, they are not only contradicting reality (since no one can be neutral), but are denying the Creator of all reality (by not bowing before his absolute Lordship). Such an attempt is both vain and immoral, both illogical and unfaithful.

In the current lecture Dr. Bahnsen explains the *nature* and *function* of worldviews. In a later lecture he will explain in more detail the *importance* of worldview considerations in defending the faith. He will demonstrate that a sound defense of the faith must proceed by means of worldview analysis, setting the Christian worldview over against the non-Christian worldview

in any of its various and multitudinous forms. For now, however, we will focus simply on the idea of a “worldview.”

I. Central Concerns

You certainly have heard of worldviews. But have you ever really studied what they are? Are you aware of the significance of worldviews to your reasoning process—even your common daily actions? Have you considered the implications of worldview-thinking for defending the Christian faith? If you desire to be an effective apologist for the Christian faith, you should.

In our hurried world of instant messaging, three minute rock-and-roll recordings, five paragraph newspaper articles, and 600 mph airliners, we are not inclined to devote the time or effort necessary for analyzing such intellectual complexities as worldviews. For the average contemporary American evangelical, if your theology won’t fit on a bumper sticker, it is simply too much trouble. In fact, many Christians are so anticipating the Lord’s “snatching” them out of this world by an “any moment” Rapture that they see no sense in the long term implications of worldview analysis. What is worse, they not only expect Jesus to return *soon* (blocking any long term outlook for the future) but also that He will personally set up a full-blown, fully-functioning political kingdom—without their having to lift a finger. This blocks any necessity for extensive reflection on the cultural and political implications of the Christian faith.¹

Let’s buck the intellectual laziness trend of our culture by looking into this question of worldviews. Let’s consider how Dr. Bahnsen defines a worldview, and then see how this has important implications for our defending our faith:

¹Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church*, 4th ed. (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 1999).

A worldview is a network of presuppositions which are not tested by natural science and in terms of which all experience is related and interpreted.

In taped lectures elsewhere he provides the following, slightly enhanced definition:

A worldview is a network of presuppositions (which are not verified by the procedures of natural science) regarding reality (metaphysics), knowing (epistemology), and conduct (ethics) in terms of which every element of human experience is related and interpreted.

Worldview Network

First, a worldview forms a network of presuppositions, an entire system of assumptions. This network is a *complex web of numerous beliefs* organized in an inter-locking, inter-dependent, self-contained truth system.

Unfortunately, many evangelical Christians generally think in a piece-meal fashion, focusing on stray individual doctrines and facts rather than a full-scale, coordinated system of beliefs. They tend to view the Christian faith as a random *assortment* of free-standing doctrines rather than as a coherent *system* of inter-locking truth claims.² In fact, we see this problematic tendency in the more popular “evidentialist” method of apologetics which defends the faith by focusing on this or that doctrine—for instance, on the “resurrection argument” or the “creation

²Or to use another image, Van Til speaks of Christian doctrine as a “seamless garment.” This image warns against trying to pull out individual threads, for such would ruin the “garment” of faith.

argument.” Dr. Bahnsen urges us to recognize that the Christian faith is a complex system of mutually-supported, inter-twined beliefs filling out a broader interdependent worldview.

As his lectures progress, Dr. Bahnsen will be arguing that you must defend the Christian faith as a package deal. He is preparing you by explaining worldviews and their significance early on. Every particular human experience, thought, or sensation must be seen and understood within the context of a broader system of interpretation of those things. Each part of a worldview must relate to every other part. As Dr. Van Til insisted, there are no brute facts, no uninterpreted facts that stand alone without reference to other facts, principles of interpretation, and especially to God.

We exist in what we call the “Universe.” This term speaks of all created things as a collected, integrated whole. It indicates that we live in a single unified and orderly system which is composed of many diversified parts. These parts function coordinately together as a whole, rational system. We do not live in a “multiverse.” A multiverse state-of-affairs would be a dis-unified, totally fragmented, and random assortment of disconnected and unconnectable facts. These unconnectable facts would be meaninglessly scattered about in a chaotic disarray and ultimate disorder, being more like an explosion in a mattress factory than coherent Universe.

Worldview Presuppositions

Second, a worldview—*any* worldview, Christian *or* secular—is founded on *special kinds* of beliefs known as “presuppositions.” This does not mean that it is established on just any collection of one’s favorite assumptions, but rather on premises of a very special kind, known as “presuppositions.”

But just what does Dr. Bahnsen mean by a presupposition? Defining presuppositions will be extremely important for your understanding the biblical approach to apologetics. In fact, this apologetic method is popularly known as “Presuppositional Apologetics,” or more simply: “Presuppositionalism.” In his book *Van Til’s Apologetic*, Dr. Bahnsen defines presupposition this way:

A “presupposition” is an elementary assumption in one’s reasoning or in the process by which opinions are formed. . . . [It] is not just any assumption in an argument, but a personal commitment that is held at the most basic level of one’s network of beliefs. Presuppositions form a wide-ranging, foundational *perspective* (or starting point) in terms of which everything else is interpreted and evaluated. As such, presuppositions have the greatest authority in one’s thinking, being treated as one’s least negotiable beliefs and being granted the highest immunity to revision.³

A presupposition is, therefore, an “elementary” (i.e., basic, foundational, starting point) assumption about reality as a whole. An elementary presupposition serves as an essential condition necessary to one’s outlook on the world and life. It is a necessary precondition for human thought and experience, without which logical reasoning would be impossible and human experience unintelligible. Let us flesh this out a little more so that you can see the significance of your presuppositions.

³Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1998), 2, note 4. See Gary DeMar, *Thinking Straight in a Crooked World: A Christian Defense Manual* (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 2001).

Presuppositions are often hidden assumptions that you reflexively depend upon for such foundational issues of human experience as the nature and structure of reality, the possibility and method of knowledge, and the standards and universality of morality. These basic presuppositions about the world and life guide you in discovering and resolving problems, planning for the future, and more; they provide the very standards for interpreting all of life. They govern the way you think and act, all the way down to how you select and employ specific facts from the countless number of facts ceaselessly flowing through your senses and into your mind each and every moment of the day. They form the very basis for your world-and-life view.

Worldview Universality

Third, “a worldview is a network of presuppositions . . . in terms of which *all* experience is related.” Dr. Bahnsen’s definition assumes and his argument asserts that Christians are not the only ones holding a worldview, as if this were some sort of narrowly religious approach to life. *Every* person must have—*does* have!—a framework through which he understands the world as a system and his relation to it. Everyone by necessity has a particular way of looking at the world which serves to organize ideas about the world in his mind. Any rational act *by definition* operates in terms of a particular outlook on the world. (Incidentally, all of this serves as additional evidence regarding the myth of neutrality.)

Lacking an interpretive worldview would be like reading a Bible verse for the first time without any context. By way of example, consider 1 Chronicles 26:18: “At Parbar westward, four at the causeway, and two at Parbar” (KJV). This verse is virtually unintelligible apart from its context.

I recall a lecture that Dr. Bahnsen was giving on the importance of “concepts” for all humans who operate in the world. To set up his discussion he asked two questions: “If I set before you a black metal and plastic box, about two feet square, with a glass screen on the front, buttons below the screen, and a long cord extending out of the back, what would you immediately recognize this to be?” Obviously the answer is: “A television set.”

Then he asked his second question: “If I took the television to an Aborigine tribe in the Australian Outback and asked them what it was, how would they respond?” One clever student in the back of the class responded: “A microwave?” Dr. Bahnsen’s point was, of course, our modern technological concepts help us recognize such things as televisions without having to analyze them.

Worldview Interpretation

Fourthly, “a worldview is a network of presuppositions . . . in terms of which all experience is related *and interpreted*.” Presuppositions hold the highest level of authority in one’s worldview and are the basis by which we interpret and understand reality. Consequently, they are the convictions you’re least likely to give up. In his book *Always Ready*, Dr. Bahnsen explains the situation:

Every thinker grants preferred status to *some* of his beliefs and the linguistic assertions which express them. These privileged convictions are “central” to his “web of beliefs,” being treated as immune from revision—until the network of convictions itself is altered. . . . The reality of human nature and behavior should be recognized: our thoughts, reasoning and conduct are governed by

presuppositional convictions which are matters of deep personal concern, which are far from vacuous or trivial, and to which we intend to intellectually cling and defend “to the end.”⁴

By the very nature of the case, your worldview—everyone’s worldview—must be founded on basic presupposed ideas held as truth and which are immune from revision. We begin with certain presuppositions and build from there in our learning, communicating, behaving, planning, and so forth. Presuppositions provide the authoritative standards by which you evaluate life issues.

In your network of beliefs, those convictions more distant from your core beliefs (your presuppositions) are more susceptible to challenge, more open to failure, and more subject to dismissal. The closer you get to core presuppositions governing your thinking, the less likely you are to reject them. They give meaning to all your other thoughts and experiences and are therefore more basic and indispensable.

Dr. Bahnsen illustrates the necessity of presuppositions for operating in the real world by considering how you even get up and get started in the morning. When you awaken in the morning you do not go through some sort of computer-like, boot-up scheme where you procedurally run through various system settings and open particular programs that will govern your activities for the day. No! Rather you arise with all of your presuppositions intact and operating so that you do not have to think through such problems, allowing you to function easily in life. Some important presuppositions about the world and life which he has in mind when using this illustration are:

⁴ Bahnsen, *Always Ready*, 218.

- The reality of an objective external world: Am I sure that I am not just a mind imagining that matter exists?⁵
- The reliability of memory: Can I trust my memory as a basic personal function necessary for living?
- The relationship of the immaterial mind and the material body: How *does* the intangible mind interact with and govern the chemical processes of the tangible body?
- Your continuing personal identity over time: Are you sure you weren't created five minutes ago with a full memory program in place?
- The reality of cause-and-effect relations: May I expect that my physical actions will impact the material world round about me?

All of these issues—*and more*—are absolutely *essential* for understanding an operating in the world around us. Your presuppositions handle the constant in-flow of sensory information so that you can interpret the real world around you without having to self-consciously grapple with these issues one-by-one as they become necessary. Thank God for presuppositions, for without them we would be constantly exhausted and never able to function in the world!

⁵Chinese philosopher Chuang-Tzu (fourth century B.C.) stated that “I do not know whether I was then a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly dreaming I am a man.”

Worldview Immunity

Fifth, “a worldview is a network of presuppositions *which are not tested by natural science.*”

Presuppositions can’t be counted, weighed, or measured; they are not seen, heard, or felt. In fact, they are the foundations upon which science stands and sensory experiences are understood. Just as the scientist stands on the floor of a laboratory to perform his experiments, so science itself stands on the floor of presuppositions in order to analyze the world.

When you go off to college or when you head out to your job, you will meet people who hold points of view antagonistic to your own Christian convictions and perspective. In order to challenge them to believe in God, it will be necessary that you understand *their* worldview presuppositions as well as your own. You will not be challenging them on the basis of random features of their worldview which are expendable. You will be undermining the very foundations of their worldview and providing for them, instead, a more sure foundation in Christ and the Christian worldview.

Conclusion

It is important that you realize that since Christianity is a worldview, the implications go beyond how you do apologetics. Christian worldview considerations require that if you are committed to Christ in one particular area of life, you must be committed to Him at every point in life.

Christianity is not concerned merely with a narrow range of human experience, involving only your prayer life, devotional reading, or worship. In our last study we noted that the biblical cry “Christ is Lord” requires that you submit to Him in all areas of life. Too many believers are “Sunday-only” Christians who quarantine religious faith from the “real,” every day life issues.

Since Christianity is a world-and-life view, it has a distinctive approach to reasoning, human nature, social relations, education, recreation, politics, economics, art, industry, medicine, and every other aspect of human experience. To be truly committed to Christ for salvation is to be committed to Christ in all of life. In our next lesson we will focus on *key issues* for any worldview, issues that only the Christian worldview makes intelligible.

II. Exegetical Observations

Our worldview analysis approach to apologetics focuses on the real world and human experience. It involves a view of the nature of reality, which requires a distinctive view of origins. Let us reflect briefly on the opening chapter to the Bible as a key component of our Christian worldview.

Genesis 1:1

The Bible opens with this simple but majestic declaration: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” These sublime words not only form the foundation for the entire Bible and redemptive history, but establish the very cornerstone for an all-encompassing worldview.

We can unpack numerous marvelous truths from this statement. We will consider just three: God exists, He is the creator of all things, and the world is not eternal. Each of these is important for our worldview and our apologetic challenge to the unbeliever.

First, Genesis 1:1 asserts that God exists. When Genesis opens with the simple declaration “In the beginning God,” it does not *argue* for God’s existence; it *assumes* and *asserts* it. It is the grand presupposition of the creation narrative. In the believing worldview, the infinite, eternal, personal God absolutely exists and is the ground of all being.

Interestingly, the way this verse appears in the text serves as a subtle rebuttal to the widespread idolatry and polytheism⁶ of Moses' day: there is only one true God, that is all the text mentions. Elsewhere the Scriptures reflect upon the message of Genesis 1 in confronting the mythical gods of the nations: "Thus you shall say to them, 'The gods that did not make the heavens and the earth shall perish from the earth and from under the heavens'" (Jer. 10:11). "For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the Lord made the heavens" (Psa. 96:5; cp. 1 Chr. 16:26).

Second, Genesis 1:1 declares God is the creator of *all* things. The Hebrew language doesn't possess a single word for "Universe." It denotes the Universe by the phrase "the heavens and the earth." This verse introduces and the following verses forthrightly declare that the God of Scripture created the entirety of the earth and the whole Universe. Here we discover an essential implication of our worldview—a two leveled reality. That is, we have the uncreated, infinite, eternal, personal God and then all else: created reality including angels, men, animals, and matter.

In the original Hebrew of Genesis 1:1, God is called *elohim*. This is a frequently recurring name for God in the Old Testament, although it often appears in abbreviated form as *el* (and is almost always translated in English as "God"). This name stresses the idea of might, strength, and power. *Elohim* is the plural of *el* and since it refers to the *one* true God, it is called a "plural of majesty," thereby intensifying the multiplied strength implied in the name. In the New Testament Paul speaks of God's "eternal power" (Rom. 1:20).

⁶Polytheism is derived from the French, *polythiesme*, which is based on the combination of two Greek words: *polu* ("many") and *theos* ("god"). Polytheism is the belief in many gods, wherein particular gods are thought to govern specific aspects of the world and life.

This name for God appears throughout Genesis 1 where Moses presents the awe-inspiring account of the creation of the entire Universe. This name of power is especially appropriate for identifying the Creator of all things.⁷ All the might, enormity, and glory of the Universe was created by *Elohim*.

The Universe is what it is because of the unlimited power of God. His might is exhibited throughout the text, not only in summarizing the *results* of his creative acts (showing, for instance, that He created the land, ocean, sun, moon, stars, animals, and man), but the *ease* of his creative activity by His mere spoken word. Elsewhere the psalmist declares: “For He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast” (Ps. 33:9). God merely speaks, and it was done.

The statement “God created the heavens and the earth” is expanded upon in the following verses where we learn that these things appeared because “God said” and declared “let there be.” And it was performed in the span of six days.⁸ The psalmist later reflects on the glorious ease of creation: “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and by the breath of His mouth all their host” (Ps. 33:6). In a similar way, the New Testament states: “By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible” (Heb. 11:3).

Third, Genesis 1:1 declares that the Universe is not eternal. Of course, this has already been implied in the preceding comments. But here we will emphasize that the text specifically

⁷Genesis 2 focuses more specifically and fully on the creation of man and his immediate surroundings. At that point we see God referred to by another name—“Lord” (e.g., Gen. 2:4, 5, 7, 8, 9). This word translates the Hebrew *yahweh*, which is God’s special covenant name which speaks of his intimate, loving concern (Ex. 6:2–3).

⁸For scientific studies on Six-Day Creation, see Wayne Frair, *Biology and Creation: An Introduction Regarding Life and Origins* (Creation Research Society, 2002) and Don B. DeYoung, *Physical Science and Creation: An Introduction* (Creation Research Society, 1998). For a biblical argument for literal Six-Day Creation as over against the Framework Hypothesis which denies the days are literal, see Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr. and Michael R. Butler, *Yea, Hath God Said?: The Framework Hypothesis/Six-Day Creation Debate* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002).

mentions “in the beginning.” This locates a starting point for the creation. The Universe has not always existed; God alone eternally exists (Deut. 33:27; Rom. 16:26; 1 Tim. 1:17). The Universe is not self-existent or self-explanatory. It had a beginning in the powerful activity of God. This presents a tremendous problem for the modern evolutionary cosmology: Where did matter come from?

Thus, Genesis 1:1 teaches at the very outset of biblical revelation, that the entire Universe is “pre-interpreted.” God creates every aspect of the Universe, sets it in its proper place, and defines its proper function. For example, He creates our sun so that it might provide us light and measure our time (Gen. 1:17–18). Even though every element of creation is not specifically assigned their roles in the biblical record, we know that God controls them and places them where He will and for His own purpose. They have no meaning apart from Him and His plan. In Job 38–41 we find a marvelous, poetic depiction of God’s pre-interpretive creative work. As Dr. Bahnsen will show in later lectures, no element of creation is intelligible apart from the great presupposition of God.

III. Questions Raised

1. Define “worldview.”
2. Why is it important that we understand the idea of a worldview?
3. Do all men have a worldview? Or is this just a Christian concept? Explain your answer.
4. Why is understanding our worldview as a “network of beliefs” important to a biblical approach to apologetics?
5. What is a “presupposition”?

6. How do your presuppositions fit into your “network of beliefs”? That is, what role do they play in your worldview network?
7. Are presuppositions easily changed or dismissed? Why do you say this?
8. What are some presuppositional issues that we have latent in our thinking and generally do not think about, but which are absolutely essential to rational living?

IV. Practical Applications

1. Engage in an in-depth study of Genesis 1 and 2, while keeping in mind the material we have been studying in this Lesson. Become more familiar with this foundational chapter to Scripture. Follow out some of the marginal references in your Bible to flesh out the meaning of Genesis 1. Jot down worldview implications of the biblical narrative of creation.
2. Carefully read Job 38–41 to gain a sense of the magnificence of God’s creative power and of man’s puny condition.
3. Discuss the idea of a worldview with your Christian friends. Show them that they have a worldview even if they do not think about it as such.
4. Discuss with your Christian friend the importance of understanding his worldview. Show him the significance of worldview thinking for living faithfully before the Lord as a Christian.
5. Talk with an unbelieving friend. Ask him if he has ever thought about the idea of a worldview. Get him to discuss how he understands and approaches the world and life as a rational person.
6. Having gotten your unbelieving friend to consider the idea of a worldview, challenge him to recognize and consider the implications of his presuppositions for his worldview.

V. Recommended Reading

Bahnsen, Greg L., “On Worshiping the Creature Rather Than the Creator”:

www.cmfnow.com/articles/PA012.htm

Hurd, Wesley, “Me and My Worldview”:

www.mckenziestudycenter.org/philosophy/articles/wrldview.html

Moore, T. M., “Beyond Creation vs. Evolution: Taking the Full Measure of the Materialist Challenge”: www.cmfnow.com/articles/PA101.htm

Nickles, James, *Mathematics: Is God Silent?* (Vallecito, Calif.: Ross House):

www.carm.org/issues/elements.htm

Sarfati, Jonathan, “Genesis: Bible Authors Believed it to be History”:

www.answersingenesis.org/docs2005/1101genesis_history.asp

Slick, Matthew J. “Elements of a Christian Worldview”: (www.carm.org/issues/elements.htm)

Solomon, Jerry, “Worldviews”: www.probe.org

Sproul, R. C. *Lifeworlds* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1986).

Stump, James, “Science, Metaphysics, and Worldviews”: www.leaderu.com/aip/docs/stump.html