

What We Believe: World View

I had thought after preparing last week's message that I would continue on with some of the other issues around modern theories concerning origins: the origin of the universe, the origin of life, the origin of humans, the origin of consciousness. There's a lot to take into account, but, rather than get into too much technical information, which has to be very limited simply because there is so much out there and it's being interpreted for us, constantly, according to the world views of various scientists and philosophers and media personalities, etc.

So, rather than getting into a technical discussion about life at the cellular level or the debate about how human consciousness might have evolved, I want to share some practical insights that I have gained from reading a book called Finding Truth by Nancy Pearcey. Pearcey is professor and scholar in residence at Houston Baptist University and a fellow of the Discovery Institute. She is an award-winning author and a highly-regarded speaker, having been invited to address audiences at universities, on television networks and at the US Capitol and the White House.

"Finding Truth" is about world views, and Pearcey bases her approach on Romans 1, which we scratched the surface of in last week's message. Let's begin by breaking that passage open and gathering principles that apply to modern world views:

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.

For since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities - His eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

For although they knew God, they neither glorified Him as God nor gave thanks to Him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator - who is forever praised. Amen.

And then down to verse 28:

Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, He gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done.

The next three verses are filled with descriptions of the evil that has come to the human race because of this rejection of God.

You can see the outline, the bare bones, of humanity's fall away from God in this passage. The truth about God is suppressed by people who have evil intentions. They know that what they are doing is in opposition to their Creator, but they do it anyway. Paul says that, not only have they suppressed the truth, but they have refused to glorify God and, in verse 28, they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God.

What took God's place? "They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator." In other words, humans made idols for themselves, other objects to hold in honor. Notice what the concept of an idol is from this passage: something created which takes the place, in people's minds and hearts, of the Creator. There have been many idols in our time, and Pearcey both reveals them and then tells us how to disarm them.

The first step in the process is to identify the idol that lies behind the world view we are being presented with. Again, an idol is something created rather than the Creator Himself. So, for example, matter is part of the created order, which means that the philosophy of materialism is an idol. What about reason? The ability to reason is one of God's gifts, but it is not God. Therefore, elevating human reason above God is making an idol out of it, an idol we call rationalism (not the same thing as rationality).

The second step is to identify the evil that results from this particular idol. Romans 1 tells us that idol-worship always leads to some form of evil and that is inevitable because every idolatry leads to a lower view of human beings. Once you take away from the equation the biblical principle that we are made in God's image, you have to replace that with a lower view of human nature. We are no longer seen as reflecting God's image, but are now in the image of something less, some natural process or mechanical design.

The third step is to test the idol by asking, "How does this viewpoint fit with what we know about the real world?" We know that all forms of idol-worship will fail because none of them can account for all that we see in creation. Because these world views are based on a part of creation, they will only satisfy our observations about that part - but will fail to account for other parts. For example, the central idea of materialism, that we are complex machines, fails on the idea of free will. Its champions argue that free will is an illusion, that we have no meaningful choices we can make, but does that fit the reality that we experience on a daily basis? And can these champions of materialism live within their own beliefs? Many of them are saying that they can't, that they still believe, defiantly, in their own freedom of choice.

If the third step is to compare the idol with what we see in the real world, the fourth is to look at the internal logic of the idolatry and ask, "Does this contradict itself in any way?" One common example is the claim that some form of relativism is absolutely true. If you argue that everything is relative and you do so in an absolute sense, you've contradicted yourself. How can nothing be absolutely true except for the statement that nothing can be absolutely true? So the next step is to look for the internal contradictions within the argument for any world view that has no place for God.

The final step is to replace the idol with the truth of Christianity, to make the case for faith in the Creator. Many people hold world views that they cannot live with. Very often, they will reach out to 'borrow' some aspect of the Christian world view in order to make their own philosophy more bearable, but they don't like to admit that they're doing that. Today, we'll give some examples of how this works and how these borrowings can

help us in sharing a world view that is based on the reality of God's creation of, and presence in, this world.

First off, let me say that it's important to realize that we absorb elements of secular world views if we refuse to study them. Pearcey talks about a woman she had a correspondence with who held the value that Christians shouldn't expose themselves to non-biblical ways of thinking. When she read one of Pearcey's earlier books, she realized that she had absorbed some of the thinking of secular writers like Rousseau and Kant - her ignorance of their philosophies and what lay behind them made her unaware of what was influencing her own world view. So, it's important for us to be aware of where the ideas of our culture come from ... and what they are leading to, as well.

Let's begin with identifying the idols. Every world view that takes God out of the center, has to replace Him with something else. In his book Culture and the Death of God literary critic Terry Eagleton lists several idols of the modern age: Enlightenment rationalists made a god of reason; Romantics deified the imagination; nationalists idealize the nation, and on it goes. "Not believing in God is a far more arduous affair than is generally imagined," Eagleton wrote and later commented that the history of philosophy is largely a history of setting up gods to take the place of God - or what the apostle Paul calls "idols". And Christian pastor and author Timothy Keller writes, "Every human personality, community, thought form and culture will be based on some ultimate concern or some ultimate allegiance - either to God or to some God substitute ... The best way to analyze cultures is by identifying their corporate idols."

One of the dominant idols or world views without God is the idea that everything we experience can be reduced, ultimately, to the laws of physics. This view is called 'physicalism' or 'materialism'. Biologist Jerry Coyne defines physicalism as "the view that all sciences are *in principle* reducible to the laws of physics." This view, he says, "must be true unless you're religious." But this is simply a different religion and other scientists admit as much. Materialist John Searle says, "There is a sense in which materialism is the religion of our time."

A related, but quite different idol of our time is called "empiricism", the belief that the only valid form of knowledge consists of empirically verifiable facts. To the empiricist, the only things that matter are the things we can measure, weigh, see and touch. Everything else is just a matter of individual preferences and values. The eighteenth century Scottish philosopher David Hume is history's champion for this view and once claimed that any book containing anything besides empirical science ought to be burned. Hume's influence among modern philosophy professors is enormous and his philosophy was parroted by Morpheus in the Matrix. But notice how this differs from physicalism. In that view, everything that matters is summed up by the laws of physics. In empiricism, everything ends up in a person's mind as we register the signals coming from the world outside us and we experience sensations that we interpret.

Let's look at those two world views - materialism or physicalism, and empiricism along with the other world view that takes place entirely within the mind, called rationalism. The idols are the physical world, on the one hand and the human mind and the way it interprets the world around it, on the other hand. Now, we need to ask about the evil that comes when we exchange, as Paul says in Romans 1:23, when we exchange the glory of the immortal God for an image or idol of something that is created. What evil is produced when we replace God with matter and the laws of physics and what happens when we replace God with the human mind? In both cases, and in all cases where we exchange belief in a Creator and accept belief in parts of the creation, we lower the value of human beings.

In the biblical world view, human beings are the image of God and His representatives on earth. In materialism, humans don't have free will and some argue that consciousness itself is an illusion. Instead of being free moral agents, one materialist, namely Francis Crick who cracked the DNA code, calls us, "nothing but a pack of neurons". Dehumanization is one of the critical challenges of our day. We've already dismissed the unborn as not having a real life, we're taking steps to do the same to the terminally ill and there are voices calling for the right to do away with handicapped children. These moves are not coming from a Christian world view, but from a materialistic one, one that sees us as nothing but a pack of neurons.

What happens to the view of human life among the empiricists, the ones who say that life exists entirely within the mind? I can't go into how they got there, but they have become the force behind the politically correct movement. They have evolved, if I can use that term, from the philosopher Hegel's idea that the individual is of no importance; it is the community that develops the standards of appropriate behavior and speech that the individual is bound to follow because the individual is the product of the community. In our day, this philosophy has made the community a form of the absolute, while the individual has nothing to say or do that he or she hasn't learned from the community, whether that community is a racial one, an ethnic one, a class or one based on sexual identity. There is no absolute truth that binds on all communities, but just the relative truth that has been formed within each separate community and which no one from outside is able to judge. In this view, the winner is Nietzsche, who once declared, "There are no facts, only interpretations". Again, a radically dehumanizing philosophy which doesn't allow persons to be seen as individuals.

The third step in dealing with these world view issues is to compare what they claim with the real world that we live in. Does it fit reality, does it fit our experience of the world around us, to conclude that we are programmed beings, either running as machines driven by the forces of nature, or as parts of a community of being that has conditioned us to think and feel and act in certain ways?

Do we really believe that we never have a choice about anything we do and that all our ethical decisions in life are somehow made for us, by forces we don't control? And that our consciousness of the world around us and of the people in it and of the thought processes we go through minute by minute are just an illusion? Serious people are making these kinds of claims on a serious scientific basis and asking us to believe that

their view best represents reality. They are writing books and teaching university courses and pushing their argument forward - but is it true? Philosopher Galen Strawson has stated, "The impossibility of free will ... can be proved with complete certainty", but in a later interview admitted that no one accepts his deterministic view. "To be honest, I can't really accept it myself," he said. "I can't really live with this fact from day to day." We have to decide what we can live with, and that what we believe truly reflects the way we experience life.

The fourth step is to test the idol to see if it contradicts itself. In the twentieth century, one extremely influential philosophy was called "logical positivism". Its central idea is that any statement that cannot be traced back to impressions we receive from our senses is not only a false statement, but a meaningless one. The problem is that this statement, this core philosophy, could not be experienced through the senses. Therefore, logical positivism collapsed - an event that William Lane Craig described as the most important philosophical event of the twentieth century.

There are tons of examples of how this can be applied, because there are a multitude of philosophies out there, but let's look at one more. Friedrich Nietzsche taught that all human action is driven by the will to power. So we ask the question, "Was Nietzsche's own theory driven entirely by the will to power ... and, if so, why should we take it seriously?"

When it comes to materialism, C.S. Lewis says some things that should undermine anyone's confidence that materialism offers truth:

If minds are wholly dependent on brains, and brains on biochemistry, and biochemistry (in the long run) on the meaningless flux of atoms, I cannot understand how the thought of those minds should have any more significance than the sound of the wind in the trees . . . If I can't trust my own thinking, of course I can't trust the arguments leading to Atheism, and therefore have no reason to be an Atheist, or anything else.

But, of course, each philosopher or skeptical scientist must make an exception for their own thinking at the moment they write out their theory because they do believe that their theory has meaning. One philosopher said that the materialist functions as though he were an 'angelic observer' somehow able to float above the determinist cage in which he locks everyone else.

In responding to the postmodern world view, we are responding to the claim that there is no universally valid truth, nothing that is true for all people in all places, but only truth that is accepted by different communities, different races of people, different genders or socio-economic classes. But how can we accept that this view is true? - it claims to be universally valid! It contradicts itself!

My objective in raising these issues is not to put down the people who hold to self-contradictory views, but simply to say that they are caught in a world view that divides their minds into two parts: with one part they hold onto the belief systems they have in

some sense become committed to, and with the other part they live life, they love their kids, they invest time and energy into raising their children because, at heart, they don't really see their children, or their colleagues, or their friends, as mere machines, collections of atoms, parroting the values of their communities. They live within an internal conflict that they cannot resolve.

Which brings me to step five, which is to share with people a unified world view, one that holds together logically, one that doesn't divide the mind into two parts, one that doesn't require that you believe things that don't make sense in the real world ... and that is the Christian world view, the view that we are created beings, not evolved machines, that we have purpose, our lives are meaningful, our choices are significant and our destiny is important. In the Christian world view, there is a real basis for claims that certain actions can be right or wrong, that racism is unjust, that hatred of others is sin. In the materialist world view, or even in the post-modern world view, these are all fuzzy areas, with arbitrary choices being made and defended.

So, I encourage you to grow in your understanding of the world, in your understanding of the theories that attempt to explain reality in our world, and in how the Christian world view responds to the chaos of confusion that currently dominates the public square. Be a person who prays for others - maybe it's just one or two people you know who are confused about what life is all about, but pray for them. And be ready to give an answer for the hope that you have, for the truth you have become convinced of, the faith that could liberate their being.