STUDIES IN A CHRISTIAN WORLD VIEW
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CONTOURS
OF A
WORLD VIEW
by
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CHAPTER 1
WANTED: A WORLD VIEW FOR TODAY

A BASIC HUMAN NEED

The quest for a unifying world view that will help us see life whole and find meaning in each part is as old as humankind. Ancient religions played this role, as well as the more theologically oriented faiths of subsequent times. Anthropologists find that contemporary primitive cultures also have world views that interpret their experiences and guide their activities. Western culture has been so influenced by science and technology that some now say we have a scientific or even a technological world view; science and its uses shape our thought and focus our lives.

Philosophers throughout the centuries conceived and debated philosophies to live by. Aristotle said that philosophy begins with wonder, wonder about the “what” and the “why” of things, about the hints of order and unity we find around us. And ordered unity, he believed, gave purpose to life. Philosophy in fact began in ancient Greece with a search for the one that unifies the many, a search whose persistence through twenty-six centuries of inquiry bears testimony to a driving human need. What is it that ties everything together, matter and mind, life and death, art and science, faith and learning, and makes this a universe? That seems to be what humans need to know. What can unify our vision of life? To see things interrelated as a whole is to get one’s bearings on the map of life, to know one’s way in the confusing interplay of ideas, to find relatedness in what we do.

The perennial quest for a world view goes further: it is also a
quest for a life that is good rather than bad, for purpose in life rather than emptiness, for something that promises hope rather than despair. World views differ in this regard. Some are more optimistic and some more pessimistic, some are deeply ethical and others only incidentally so. Not all satisfy the human longing equally, nor all in the same way; but all express a deeply rooted human need. Aristotle also asked about man's highest good, a summum bonum that gives everything else its value and purpose. The need for a unifying summum bonum is the need for a world view.

In the final analysis, the biblical writers would insist (and many of the great minds of the past would agree) that it is not how or what we think that promises hope, but God himself. God the Creator and Lord of all must be the unifying focus of life and thought, and his action in Jesus Christ restores purpose and hope to humanity. Augustine's classic words sum it up: "Thou hast made us for Thyself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee." Or the Westminster Shorter Catechism: "The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever." The living God is our highest end, our summum bonum; and a Christian world view unpacks the implications of this belief for all our thought and action.

A world view is also needed as a guide to thought. A world filled with things to think about and arrayed with a multitude of ideas and theories on everything under the sun compels us to be selective. Nobody can possibly consider everything or consistently accept everything. And for any particular world view, some topics have more interest or importance than others and some theories more promise than others. We have to set priorities. What, then, will determine our priorities and guide our selectivity?

In a recent book* Nicholas Wolterstorff distinguishes between "data beliefs" and "control beliefs." He claims that the selection, evaluation, and construction of theories in any discipline are influenced not only by what we believe to be the relevant data, but by other theoretical beliefs that hold as well. A person's control beliefs can be scientific theories or religious beliefs or anything that gives a world view. They will affect his selection of theories in any field: in art criticism, in historical explanation, in psychology, in philosophy, and even in biblical interpretation. The develop-