
The Lordship of Christ Over All of Life

By Barry Seagren

We've been looking at our core values, and today I want to focus on the Lordship of Christ over all of life. (Col 3:17) This is one of those things that no one can object to. No one believes in the Lordship of Christ over half of life. But it is not as straightforward as it may seem. Why not? Because in Western culture there is a dichotomy, a sharp division which has affected us deeply. This split can be expressed in several ways.

The most common is the division between the sacred and the secular. Religious or spiritual things are on one side of the line; normal, everyday matters are on the other. Another way to express the split is the private versus the public. Religion is fine, but it's a private matter, and it must be kept private. To let it impinge on the public sphere is known as "shoving your religion down someone's throat." Christopher Reeve, the actor, made this comment about stem cell research: *When matters of public policy are debated, no religions should have a place at the table.* In other words, you can have your religion, if you need that sort of thing, but keep it to yourself. Reeve's statement is a big con, because what it actually means is that only one religion gets a place at the table, namely secular humanism. To give another example, perhaps someone has said to you, "Well, that may be true for you, but it's not true for me." That's the split again; religion is private truth, not public truth. Or for a third example, you may remember that when Tony Blair and George Bush met to discuss the Iraq war, the press got themselves into quite a lather over whether the two leaders had prayed together. Why? Your religion is a private matter, and it mustn't affect your public life.

Another way the dichotomy appears is religion versus science, or values versus facts. Facts are things that are out there, objective, known by everyone; values are personal, subjective, each to his own. Science deals with the facts; religion deals with values. And never the twain shall meet. This is why Richard Dawkins gets so worked up over creationism or Intelligent Design. Creationism is based on religious values, or so he says, whereas Evolution is scientific and rational. Therefore creationism has no place in the schools. Christians have bought into this. I read of a theology teacher in a Christian high school who drew a heart on one side of the blackboard and a brain on the other. She then pointed out that the heart is what we use for religion, while the brain is what we use for science. Tragically, only one girl in the class objected.

The same divided life mentality appears among Christians in the form of the spiritual versus the non-spiritual, or the soul versus the body. The idea is that there are some areas of life that are important to God, things like prayer and bible-reading and evangelism. There are other things that may be necessary, but they're non-spiritual, they don't really matter that much to God, things like education or business or the arts or science. Those things are okay, but God has better things for us to do. The most spiritual Christians go into "the ministry"; the rest are simply the supporting cast. I have read of doctors who left medicine in order to serve the Lord. That's crazy. Can't medicine be a great way to serve the Lord?

This dichotomy is what keeps Christianity boxed up to a tiny religious area, totally private and completely innocuous and irrelevant. This is what strips the Gospel of its power to permeate the whole of our lives, and strips it of its power to challenge and redeem the whole of our culture. The secular world reinforces it by telling us that we're the only ones who have a religion. We're religious; they're normal. They don't have a religion. We can keep our religious bits if we want to, just so long as we keep it private. I'd like to quote an outstanding book by Nancy Pearcey, called *Total Truth*:

When the public sphere is cordoned off as a religion-free zone, our lives become splintered and fragmented. Work and public life are stripped of spiritual significance, while the spiritual truths that give our lives the deepest meaning are demoted to leisure activities, suitable only for our time off. The gospel is hedged in, robbed of its power to leaven the whole of life. How do we break free? By discovering a worldview perspective that unifies both secular and sacred, public and private, within a single framework. By understanding that all honest work and creative enterprise can be a valid calling from the Lord. And by realising there are biblical principles that apply to every field of work. (p65)

She says we break free by discovering a worldview perspective. What is that about? What is a worldview? The man who can help us here is Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920). He was a remarkable man. At different times he was the founder and chancellor of the Free University of Amsterdam, the Prime Minister of Holland, and the head of his denomination. There is a much-quoted saying of Kuyper's: *There is not a square inch in the whole realm of human existence over which Christ does not cry, "That is mine!"* Kuyper taught that the Christian faith is not just about personal salvation. It is a worldview, and by that he meant an all-embracing, coherent understanding of reality, a vision of the world that has God as its centre and has far-reaching implications in every area of life. It is the lens through which we see everything; it shapes the choices we make and the lives we live. The Christian worldview is a full-blown system of truth, and it stands in stark contrast to competing worldviews such as Marxism or Islam or Secular Humanism.

What are the elements of the Christian worldview?

- The Biblical God. A God who is infinite and personal and triune. A God who is king over his universe.

- A purpose-built CREATION. A meaningful world created deliberately by God as opposed to a meaningless world evolving by chance.
- Human beings made in God's image.
- The FALL as an event in history, the point at which sin and suffering and death entered God's good world. We now live in a spoilt universe.
- A complete REDEMPTION in Christ. Jesus died not just to get people to Heaven, but to restore and renew the whole of God's creation. That redemption is partial now, but will be gloriously complete when he returns.

Those are the pillars of the Biblical worldview. If you want it even simpler, just focus on the three words in caps: Creation, Fall, Redemption. In fact those are the three issues that any worldview has to address: How did it all begin? What is wrong with it now? How can it be set right again?

Kuyper drew out the implications of a Biblical worldview in various areas, including theology, politics, science, and the arts. He was simply following the biblical command to *take every thought captive to Christ* (2 Cor. 10:5). I remember reading Kuyper 40 years ago and finding it so exciting. It gave me a large vision of God and a large vision of the biblical faith and its relevance to all of life. It gave me a bigger understanding of the redemption we have in Christ. It also gave me a great confidence in the Christian faith as a robust system of truth that can more than hold its own against all competing worldviews. For many of us, Francis Schaeffer was the one who helped us understand these things. It was all there in Kuyper. If you want something more current, I recommend *Total Truth* by Nancy Pearcey. It is truly outstanding. The advantage of this over Schaeffer is that she is bang up to date, well-written, and easy to understand.

One part of the biblical worldview that Pearcey emphasizes is what is known as the Cultural Mandate, Genesis 1:28. This is God's first command to human beings: *Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.*

It is helpful to divide this into two parts:

- Be fruitful and multiply: develop the social world. Here is the mandate to build families, communities, schools, governments, laws.
- Subdue the earth: harness the natural world. Here is the mandate to plant crops, build bridges, design computers.

We were put here to make something of God's world. Our original purpose was to create cultures, build civilizations – nothing less. Do you see what that means? It means your job is not a second-class activity, something you do just to put food on the table. It is the high calling for which we were originally created. This is why our jobs, and how we do our jobs, matters to God. Work is how we fulfill the cultural mandate. We can go further. Our work can also be redemptive. Our work can be a way in which we struggle against the damage done by the Fall and are thereby involved in Christ's larger work of redemption.

So, the problem is the divided life, the sacred-secular dichotomy. The answer is worldview thinking, understanding Christianity as a total system of truth. What about the application? The value of worldview thinking lies in its personal application, and that means learning to bring every aspect of our lives under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Let me try to ease us into the area of application with a question. My friend Dick Keyes has a talk on this subject and he asks, What is more spiritual, praying or washing the dishes? Answer: it depends on whether it's your turn to wash the dishes! You see, everything is spiritual except what is actually sin. Someone might say, Well, I can pray as I wash dishes, as though the praying can redeem the dishwashing. That's not the point. Ordinary life matters to God. All of life is spiritual except what is actually sin. The Reformers felt very strongly about this because they were struggling to break free of a Roman Catholic system that had a strong dichotomy between sacred and secular. Martin Luther put it well. He said that changing his baby's nappies was more spiritual than anything he had ever done in a monastery.

How does the Lordship of Christ apply to students? I used to speak now and then at university Christian Unions. I would usually come home depressed because it seemed that what they were really interested in was singing choruses with their hands in the air. The talk was a bit of a distraction. Surely a key purpose of a CU is to help students deal with the intellectual challenges raised by a university education. And you cannot meet the intellectual challenges by simply beefing up your devotional life. I felt many of these students had swallowed the whole dichotomy. They weren't taking their faith into the classroom and they weren't taking their brains into church. Their Christianity was a little personal thing between them and God. They didn't understand Christianity as a robust worldview that could stand against what they were getting in their courses. They didn't understand the importance of loving God with their minds as well as their hearts.

How does the Lordship of Christ apply to work? Let me quote Nancy Pearcey again:

Most of us absorb the idea that serving God means primarily doing church work. If we end up in other fields of work, then we think serving the Lord means piling religious activities on top of our existing responsibilities. But where does that leave the job itself? Is our work only a material necessity, something that puts food on the table but has no intrinsic spiritual significance? ... Most don't even know what it means to have a Christian perspective on our work, (beyond) being ethical on the job.

Years ago we tried something in our services called Christians at Work. It didn't seem right that the only people who got to report on how they were serving the Lord were the missionaries. What about everybody else? So, once a month, we asked someone in a more traditional job to report to us. The brief was simple: tell us what you do, and tell us how your Christian beliefs affect the way you do it. What we got, with very few exceptions, was something like this: "I'm a dogcatcher; my job is very stressful; I try to witness to my colleagues; please pray for me." Hardly anyone had thought through how they could glorify God in the job itself.

Another example. At our last congregational meeting at Bohunt there was much talk about Jim's divine calling and our solemn vows. That bothered me. What happened to the idea of the Lordship of Christ over all of life? What happened to the idea that being a pastor at Bohunt was not necessarily more spiritual than being a caretaker at Bohunt. It seemed that Jim Downie had a calling, whereas Tom Harding just had a job. This too was something the Reformers addressed. In the Middle Ages, the word vocation, or calling, was used only for religious jobs, like priest or monk or nun. Martin Luther deliberately applied the same word to all jobs. He taught that any work may be a "calling" from God, the merchant and the farmer and the weaver and the housewife as much as the minister and the missionary.

Let me try to work this out a bit further. I'll use John Kirby as an example. John runs his own small business. How does he practice the Lordship of Christ at work? Well, by not fiddling his books and not exploiting his employees and not cheating his customers, and I'm sure he doesn't. But is that it? What about the job itself? John designs and builds custom kitchens. How does that glorify God? Applying a Christian worldview to his work means asking himself some questions: What does God's Word tell me about families, about homes, about food, about eating together? And does that have any relevance to how I do my kitchens?

I'll pick on Steve Read as another example. Steve is involved in recycling. Now, if he goes to work as a pantheist he will be thinking, "God is all and all is god; I am a part of nature and nature is a part of me. Our role as humans is simply to blend in and cause as few ripples as possible." That worldview may have implications for policy decisions. However, if Steve goes to work as a Christian he will be thinking, "We have been given dominion over God's creation, but there is a difference between responsible dominion and sinful exploitation." That view may have different implications. Now, I'm not saying that the Bible tells us how to design kitchens or do recycling. Of course not. But I am saying that once we see that Christianity is a worldview, then we will try to think through its implications for everything we do, and that is a crucial part of practicing the Lordship of Christ over all of life.

One last example. Some of you are teachers. What is a Christian teacher? One who prays for her students and tries to share her faith with her colleagues and then teaches the same stuff in the same way as everybody else. No. Practicing the Lordship of Christ means thinking deeply and biblically about what you teach and about how you teach it.

What is my purpose in all this? It is not to diminish the value of Bible-reading or prayer or evangelism; not at all. Rather it is to affirm the value of the whole of life, to break down this dichotomy, to give us a bigger view of God and his truth, and to help us to serve God and glorify God in all that we do. Let me finish by coming back to Colossians 3:17: ***Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.***

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