

Transformation: Dynamic Worldview or Repressive Ideology?

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Introduction: On the Writing of Worldview Books

When Christians talk and write about education, the discourse of “transformation” is often nearby.¹ Christian education, if it is to be worthy of its name, must be transformational in character. And, as Christian educators, we root our transformational view of education in a biblical worldview. We are concerned with transformation not because a modernist narrative of the ineluctable progress of humanity animates our work, but because we believe that in Christ all things are made new. And we believe that that newness in Christ is not a once and for all accomplishment in the life of an individual, but an ongoing dynamic in history and in all of life. We need to be transformational in education because the transforming vision of the biblical worldview is a vision that responds prophetically and creatively to each new situation.

Now I don’t drop a phrase like, “the transforming vision,” just to be self-referential. Some (perhaps many) readers of this journal will know of the book that Richard Middleton and I co-authored entitled, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View*.² Middleton and I have been amazed, gratified

¹ For example, consider Andrew Wright’s article, “Transformative Christian Education: New Covenant, New Creation. An Essay in Constructive Theology,” *Journal of Education and Christian Belief* 2.2 (Autumn 1998), together with the responses from Signe Sandsmark, “Response to Andrew Wright,” *Journal of Education and Christian Belief* 2.2 (Autumn 1998), and Elmer John Thiessen, “Transformative Christian Education: A Response to Andrew Wright,” and Wright’s reply, “Transformative Christian Education Revisited - A Response to the Critiques of Sandsmark and Thiessen,” *Journal of Education and Christian Belief* 3.1 (Spring 1999).

See also Peter Hobson and Louise Welbourne, “A Conceptual Basis for Transformative Christian Religious Education,” *Journal of Christian Education* 40.1 (April 1997).

² (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1984).

and deeply humbled by the kind of impact that this little book has had in the Christian community, especially in the area of education. The book has had a life and a ministry that goes far beyond anything that its authors had ever anticipated.

As we have talked to people over the years about the book we have often asked them how the book functioned in their lives. What kind of book was this for them? How did they receive it the first time they read it? And we have found some categories developed by Walter Brueggemann to be helpful to understand the various ways in which the book has impacted people.³ Specifically talking about the psalms, Brueggemann distinguishes between three different kinds of psalms - psalms of orientation, disorientation and re-orientation. And it seems to me that these categories are helpful in talking about other kinds of texts as well.

Some texts function as orientation texts for us. They are texts that tell you how things work, how things basically hang together in life. They are *orientation* texts because they provide us with a basic orientation and foundational direction for life.

Other texts are more disorienting in character, either because they are giving painful voice to a sense of disorientation or because in our reading of these texts we get disoriented. The psalms of lament that scream at God to wake up and get involved again in the calamities of his people, and moreover blame God for those calamities, give voice to a disorientation that says, things are not working out here, I can't make sense of reality anymore.⁴ And such texts create a

³ Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984).

⁴ Psalms 44 and 88 are good examples of such abrasive lament.

sense of disorientation when they are read. Maybe that is why the lament psalms are so seldom read in our churches!

Thirdly, some texts could be described as texts of reorientation. You get a sense when you read them that the author has come through a process wherein a previously settled orientation has been turned on its head, the author has struggled through a period of deeply painful disorientation and now has come to a profound resolution of the previous time of troubles and experienced a liberating reorientation. In the psalms, such reorientation is often articulated in terms of singing a new song.

So, some texts orient life, some disorient things, and others are read and experienced as breakthrough to a renewed orientation. And Middleton and I have found that *The Transforming Vision* has been a text that has taken on all three roles in people's lives. Some folks read that book and it precipitated a profound worldview crisis for them. Our non-dualistic interpretation of Scripture, together with our appraisal and critique of Western modern culture served to undermine deeply held and previously unquestioned beliefs. Disorientation was the result.

Others picked up the book and had an almost immediate "aha" kind of experience. They report back to us that what we managed to do was to articulate precisely what they were struggling with and provide them with a new, transformational way of living and thinking. For them, this was a reorientation text.

But the text also functions as an orientation text for people. Indeed, it is often people who first experienced reorientation in this book that then, after a few years, become so comfortable with this vision of Christian discipleship, this transforming vision way of reading Scripture and engaging culture, that the book essentially becomes a text of orientation in their lives. My hunch is that this

is the predominant way the book functions in the area of Christian education. And there is nothing surprising about this. In many ways *The Transforming Vision* is fundamentally a book of orientation. In the book, Middleton and I attempt to give the lay of the land, provide a foundational perspective or orientation that will help Christians navigate their way as disciples of Jesus Christ at the end of the twentieth century (none of us thought that the book would still be in print in the 21st century!):

Here is how a worldview works as a vision of and for life, formed, articulated and enacted in community.

Here is how worldviews take on cultural flesh.

Here is the basic shape of a biblical worldview - creation, fall and redemption.

Here is what got the church off the tracks - dualism.

Here is the way in which western culture, rooted in such a dualism, developed into the kind of idolatrous culture that we presently live in.

And here is a way to engage that culture in general and academic life in particular that is biblically faithful.

So in writing a book like this we attempted to give orientation, direction, a sense of bearings and a foundational framework for a transformational Christian discipleship.

Sixteen years and fourteen printings later, however, I perceive there to be a problem. In fact there are two problems. The first is a problem with worldviews. The second is a problem with disorientation.

The problem with worldviews

A lot of Christian scholars these days are reacting to the notion of worldviews. In education, Nicholas Wolterstorff has been vocal for some years now on the limitation of worldview language to describe what Christian

education is all about. Wolterstorff is worried that worldview is too *viewish* and not enough concerned with praxis. We need to raise children not just to think Christianly, but to live Christianly, that is, we are called to an education for discipleship, for praxis.⁵ Now I have no difficulty with what Wolterstorff is saying here at all and think that such an emphasis on praxis was always at the heart of what we were striving for in *The Transforming Vision*.

Others are more taken by the postmodern critique of worldviews. Think about it for a moment, worldviews are, afterall *world* views. They are, by definition, comprehensive in scope, they are integrating perspectives addressing all of life; they place things in the broadest possible horizon; they determine who is in and who is out, what is right and what is wrong. They are, in short, prime examples of what postmodernists call totality thinking.⁶ And all such attempts at totality, postmodernists insist, must be deconstructed as the ideological power grabs that they are. They claim to universality, but are necessarily the particular perspective of a certain time. They claim to comprehensiveness, but can only do so by marginalizing and ruling out of order any and all alternative visions. And such worldviews hide their own constructed character behind a facade of either the rhetoric of common sense (“don’t all thinking people see things this way?”) or the heavy hand of divine sanction (“this is *the* Christian worldview - it is simply what the bible teaches if you would only open your eyes to see it!”).

It is this last strategy of legitimation (the heavy hand of divine sanction) that has so many Christian scholars and educators reacting against the discourse

⁵ See especially, Wolterstorff’s *Educating for Responsible Action* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980). A similar praxis orientation, yet still within a framework driven by worldview thinking, is found in Gloria Goris Stronks and Doug Blomberg (eds), *A Vision With A Task: Christian Schooling for Responsive Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993).

⁶ I have addressed these issues at greater length in “Regimes of Truth and the Rhetoric of Deceit: Colossians 2 in Postmodern Context,” *Interface: A Forum for Theology in the World* 2,1 (May 1999): 23-37.

of worldview. It is all too heavy-handed, there is no room to move, to change, to grow, to question. For them, the rhetoric of education and scholarship directed by a Christian worldview is a cover for an imposed orthodoxy. Worldview becomes the fence that keeps you penned in and inhibits creativity. There may well be the *rhetoric* of transformation, but the reality is that there is an imposed uniformity and sameness. Educationally, such an employment of worldview language serves to engender schools of protective custody rather than dynamic transformation.

The Problem of disorientation

There is, however, a second problem with worldview talk that I think is even more pressing, at least at an existential level. If you read the psalms of disorientation you will be able to discern that the problems there expressed are often not just that the prior orientation is no longer sufficient, but that there is, more devastatingly, a sense that the psalmist's present crisis is not taken seriously when placed in the context of that orientation. I can illustrate this with reference to Job. Job's life falls apart and he can't figure out why. His experience was in profound tension with the orientation that he had come to accept as orthodox Jewish faith. If he was God-fearing and torah-obeying, then why does all hell break loose in his life? How can he deal with this disorienting tension between prior orientation and present experience? Enter his friends. "There is no disjunction, no tension. The prior orientation said that if you sinned, life will fall apart. Your life has fallen apart. Ergo, you must have sinned." Do you see what is going on here? Job's complaint, his lament, his disorientation is dismissed by his friends in the name of the orthodoxy of their shared Jewish orientation in life. Job's disorientation is not taken seriously and he is counselled to stop questioning, accept the answers that an orthodox worldview provides, repent and get on with life. Job will have nothing of it. And, as far as I can see, young

people at the beginning of the 21st century will have nothing of it either. Imposing upon their experience the dictates of a previously articulated worldview, even if that is the articulation of a transformational worldview, will invariably result in alienation, rebellion and rejection.

Perhaps another metaphor could help us get at the problem. Worldviews are often described as maps that provide orientation and direction. But how helpful is a map when you are so disoriented that you can't even find where you are on the map, or when it is too dark to even read the map? Bruce Cockburn's perspective on maps needs to be taken seriously by anyone preoccupied with worldviews:

Sometimes the best map will not guide you
you can't see what's round the bend
sometimes the road leads through dark places
sometimes the darkness is your friend
today these eyes scan bleached out land
for the coming of the outbound stage
pacing the cage⁷

In the "bleached out land" that characterizes the cultural wilderness of late or post modern culture, we still need vision, we still seek to find a way forward and perhaps even escape, but sometimes the best maps will prove to be insufficient. Indeed, sometimes it feels as if it is precisely these maps, these worldviews, these comprehensive frameworks, that puts us into cages that get us pacing, impatient for our freedom.

So here is the question that arises out of this problematizing of worldviews. If it is true that sometimes maps will fail us and perhaps even imprison us, and if there is some truth in the postmodern critique of worldviews as invariably repressive power grabs under the cover of either common sense or

⁷ "Pacing the Cage," from the album *Charity of Night* © Golden Mountain Music, 1996.

biblical sanction, then what do we do with our own rhetoric of transformation? Or to put the question more simply and starkly, can a transformational worldview - even one that is deeply rooted in scripture - become a repressive, closed-in-on-itself ideology? If it is in principle possible that any orientation can easily become a self-justifying ideology which will not countenance disorientation and therefore can never give birth to a reorientation, then could this be happening in our own worldview, our own educational practice, our own lives? Sadly, I think that the answer to this question is, yes.

From Dynamic Worldview to Repressive Ideology

It seems to me that there are five ways in which a biblically rooted, transformational worldview can succumb to ideology. And these five ways, my five points, just happen to produce an interesting acronym that some readers might recognize, namely, TULIP. Only here, TULIP has no direct reference to the five points of Calvinism as encoded by the Synod of Dordt, but refers to the five components of a worldview turned ideology.⁸

In summary, worldviews become ideologies when they become

Total Systems of
Unconditional Finality that have
Lost their Biblical Dynamism, thereby becoming
Irrelevant or Inconsequential to changing cultural contexts, because they
are preoccupied with the
Protective Ethos of an enclosed community

Let's unpack this in some detail.

⁸ For the non-Calvinists readers of this article a word of explanation is in order. In 1618-19 a synod was convened in the Dutch city of Dordrecht to deal with the heretical doctrines of Jacob Arminius. Arminius had five points of doctrine that the synod deemed heretical and in need of rebuttal. The form of the rebuttal came in five counter points that have become known by the acronym TULIP. Those points are, Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and the Perseverance of the saints. For the purposes of this article, the acronym TULIP is useful on a number of levels. Let the reader understand.

1. A transformationally dynamic worldview can be reduced to a repressive ideology if it is taken to be a Total System. The problem that I am identifying here is an overemphasis on a legitimate dimension of all worldviews. Worldviews *are* visions of life that are comprehensive in scope. Any worldview must be a *worldview*, addressing all of life. Consequently, worldviews do make real cognitive claims about the world that are, moreover, invariably set in the context of a grand story or metanarrative. And while the postmodern incredulity toward all metanarrative is perfectly understandable given the career of every metanarrative on offer (including the Christian one), I would contend nonetheless that metanarratives are plain and simply constitutive dimensions of human life and culture forming.⁹

The problem, however, is a certain kind of overemphasis on this comprehensive character of worldviews and a certain way in which this dimension of worldviews gets articulated and thought through. It seems to me that what happens is that we end up with worldviews that function quasi-theoretical, cognitively overloaded totality systems. In education this results in an intellectualism that bears little formative fruit in the lives of our students, engenders an unseemly intellectual arrogance and superiority complex amongst its adherents and privileges only the cognitively gifted in our classrooms.¹⁰

The problem with worldview as a total system is that this model fails to recognize that no worldview ever attains a total perspective because all

⁹ Richard Middleton and I have argued this more fully in *Truth is Stranger Than It Used to be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, Ill.: 1995), esp. chapters 4 and 5.

¹⁰ Harry Fernhout makes similar points in "Christian Schooling: Telling a Worldview Story," in *The Crumbling Walls of Certainty*, edited by Ian Lambert and Suzanne Mitchell (Sydney: Centre for the Study of Australian Christianity, 1997). Similar points are made by Doug Blomberg, Stuart Fowler and Ian Lambert in their essays in the same volume.

worldviews are located in particular times, cultures and traditions. There is no such thing as a timeless worldview.

More importantly, however, the notion of worldview as total system buys into an intellectualism that says that if we think right we will act right. You know the argument, if only we get our intellectual categories straight then we will live in terms of those categories. The problem is that there is no evidence whatsoever that this might in fact be the case. Again, this is why Wolterstorff is so critical of the limitations of education for forming a “Christian mind.” The problem is that “minds” are only one dimension of what it means to be human and what inspires and directs human action. My fear is that we have so over-intellectualized our worldview that our imaginations have been taken culturally captive.¹¹

You see, systems can be taught, but worldviews are caught. Systems are prone to catechetical instruction and affirmation. Worldviews capture your heart and imagination. Systems tend to be static and timeless. Worldviews are dynamic and historically situated. This leads me to my second point.

2. A worldview is on the path of ideology when it is taken to represent **Universal Finality**. Again, this problem emerges from an overemphasis of a legitimate dimension of all worldviews. Worldviews are never the private possession of local communities. No one really believes that their worldview is OK for them, but not necessarily for everyone. Even the relativist thinks that others should be relativistic. The tolerant liberal refuses to tolerate intolerant conservatives. All worldviews implicitly or explicitly make truth claims of universal applicability, and they make those claims with a faith-directed certainty.

¹¹ See my *Subversive Christianity: Imaging God in a Dangerous Time* (Seattle: Alta Vista College Press, 1994), esp. ch. 2.

But when you hold a worldview with universal finality - that is, with the belief that this worldview has *arrived* at ultimate and universal truth, with no need to listen and learn from any other worldview - then an ideology has been born. With the pretense of universal finality is lost a proper grasp of the particularity, ambiguity and unfinished character of one's own vision.

3. A third way that a transformative worldview can succumb to ideology is when it **Loses** its biblical dynamism. [Admittedly, I'm stretching my language in order to make my acronym work!]

The kind of transformational worldview that has animated so much of our educational theory and practice has its vitality, its power, its depth of insight, its rootage in Christ *only* to the degree that it is constantly informed by, corrected by, re-visioned by, a dynamic engagement with Scripture. The danger is that once our worldview has been transformed by a more wholistic and perhaps more radical way of reading scripture, we again think that we have arrived. The temptation is that either its authors or its readers think that a book like *The Transforming Vision* got it all right.

In such a context I would suggest that we always follow this hermeneutical rule: if our reading of Scripture always confirms our worldview and if the Scriptures never surprise, confuse, upset or disorient us, then we are undoubtedly misreading the Scriptures. A sure sign of ideology is when the Bible *only* functions as a text of orientation in our lives. If this text never disorients us, then it will never then have the resources to provide us with reorientation in changing and confusing cultural contexts.

There is another dimension of this loss of biblical dynamism that merits comment. One of the consequences of an ideological worldview and an ideological approach to the biblical text is that paradoxically the text tends to lose its currency in our lives. Moreover, I have observed that many of those who

talk long and loud about biblical authority seldom find it necessary to deeply engage this text. You can see how this works. Once you think that you know what the Bible says, all that is left is to proclaim the authority of the Bible ever loudly. You don't have to actually read the text or struggle with it because you already know what it is going to say. Sadly, however, what is really proclaimed as authoritative is not the Bible but the ideological worldview that we impose upon this text.¹²

With the loss of biblical vitality, not only does the worldview become repressively ideological, the community also succumbs to biblical illiteracy. And when that happens, the death of the church and the various ministries and cultural expressions of the Christian community, including the Christian school, is not far behind.

4. A fourth indication that a transformational worldview is becoming an ideology is when that worldview becomes **Irrelevant** or **Inconsequential** to its changing cultural context. For a worldview to sustain people with a vision and not be reduced to a set of catechetical affirmations it must engender a transformational praxis. As soon as a worldview becomes ideological its cultural witness becomes locked into a particular time and place, thereby losing its ability to maintain a radical and prophetic relevance to changing circumstances. The relation between worldviews and cultural praxis is two directional. Not only is cultural praxis rooted in worldview, worldview is always lived and formed in interaction with cultural praxis.

¹² Lest the reader think that I am constructing a straw man here, I will name names. Ronald Nash's book *Worldviews in Conflict* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) presents itself as a defense of Christianity in the world of ideas. Apart from this succumbing to the intellectualistic temptation critiqued above, it is instructive that this defense and exposition of a Christian "worldview" has no need to ever actually engage the biblical text with any exegetical attention. Moreover, the author also doesn't find it necessary to devote more than a few sentences to Jesus! For more bad news see my review in *Calvin Theological Journal* 28 (1993): 505-507.

The intellectualism that so often characterizes ideologically misformed worldviews gives rise to this kind of cultural irrelevance precisely because worldview conformity or adherence is measured in terms of intellectual assent to certain doctrines rather than by the praxis of the worldview-shaped community.

Some years ago a graduate student wrote to me about a doctoral dissertation that he was writing on the effectiveness of Christian colleges in inculcating a Christian worldview in their students. He had set up a survey that he was sending out to alumni of one Christian college as part of his research and, since he was, at least in his own mind, so indebted to the influence of *The Transforming Vision* in his work he asked me if I would comment on the survey he had designed. Now apart from the fact that the survey asked questions that, given the context, had clearly right and wrong answers (like, “Do you think it important to pray for your colleagues at work?” - what Christian college grad would want to say no to that?), thereby rendering the results useless from a social scientific perspective, there was another glaring problem with his work. All he was doing by means of this survey was measuring what these people *thought* about the world, not how they actually lived. This student felt that if he could ascertain the basic furniture of their intellectual framework then he would be able to discern the effectiveness of their Christian college education.

I wrote back and suggested that the student had not understood what worldviews were all about and that this survey would not give him real insight at all. I suggested a different kind of survey that would ask different kinds of questions. Things like,

What kind of involvement do you have in your neighbourhood?

What are the local social and political issues that you are concerned with?
How do you enact that concern?

Would you please send us a photograph of your living room? [Which could be then analyzed in terms of the art on the wall, whether there is a television, video game, etc. in the room, and how the furniture is set up in relation to such entertainment technology.]

Could you estimate for us how much time you spend watching television each day? How much time surfing the net? Would you send us a list of your favourite television shows and web sites?

Could you please send us a list of the meals you have shared with your family in the last two weeks? What was on the menu?

Where do you buy your groceries?

What is your principle means of transportation?

Would you be so kind as to send us your last three credit card statements?

Would you give us permission to sift through your garbage at the side of the road for the next three weeks? We promise not to make a mess, we just want to see what kinds of things you throw out.

Then I suggested to this doctoral student that if he wanted to know about the Christian worldview of these Christian college alumni, then these would be the kinds of things that might help him make such a discernment. Worldviews are lived more than they are thought. And the question of the success of Christian education hinges on the lived lives of our graduates. The issue for Christian education must be character formation for radical discipleship.

The first time that I ever attended a meeting about Christian education, someone asked whether the children from this school would be able to “fit in” to the larger culture when they graduated. And I’ll never forget the answer that the principal of that school gave. “Fit in? I certainly hope not! We are educating these children to be misfits for the Kingdom of God.” And by this she did not mean that these would be people who couldn’t engage their culture because they had been sequestered into a closed-in-on-itself tribal community. Rather, she sought an education that would help these children to be fully engaged in their

culture, living out of a radically different vision, animated by an alternative vision. This was an education that was consequential because it was relevant. And it was relevant because it refused to allow its own worldview to be reduced to an intellectualistic ideology. This leads me to my fifth point.

5. A transformational worldview becomes ideological when it is employed to serve a **P**rotective ethos of safety in a self-enclosed Christian community. A protective ethos that seeks to insulate our children and ourselves from the world rather than forming character that will engage the world with the love of Jesus manifest on the cross is an ideology that is unworthy of the gospel and Christ's sacrifice.

Similar to my comments about **T**otal Systems and **U**niversal Finality, there is something legitimate about worldviews functioning to create an ordered world of some safety. One can be secure in the faith and at home with Jesus. And the biblical worldview does (like all worldviews) create something of a sacred canopy over us.¹³ But that secure structure is, in biblical tradition, always open to deconstruction when it serves a self-protective community with a fortress mentality.

Biblical faith is clear on this. The secure home of covenantal life before the face of God is not for self-enclosed protection but for ministry. This home is characterized not by the locked doors of ideological fear but by the open and risky hospitality of a community that is open to the world because it confesses that Christ died for this world.¹⁴ The offense of this worldview is that it offers us

¹³ This was a central insight of Peter Berger's book *The Sacred Canopy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967).

¹⁴ I have developed some of these ideas further in "Homemaking in Exile: Homelessness, Postmodernity and Theological Reflection," in *Reminding: Renewing the Mind in Learning*, edited by Doug Blomberg and Ian Lambert (Sydney, Australia: Centre for the Study of Australian Christianity, 1998).

comfort and security by taking the yoke of Christ. But this yoke turns out to be a cross of suffering service. This is not a safe worldview by how most people count safety. And when it becomes preoccupied with safety and matters of purity and keeping oneself unstained by the world, then it is clear that a dynamic worldview has become a repressive ideology.

So, can a dynamic, transformational - even deeply biblical - worldview succumb to ideological distortion? Yes, of course it can. Especially when that worldview is taken to be a total system of unconditional finality that loses its biblical dynamism, thereby also becoming irrelevant and inconsequential to changing cultural contexts precisely because it is preoccupied with a protective ethos of an enclosed community. And if our schools seem to be such enclosed communities driven by a fearful and reactionary protective ethos, then I would humbly submit that such schools are more likely rooted in a repressive ideology than a dynamically biblical worldview.

Keeping a Dynamic Worldview Dynamic

In conclusion, I will make a few comments on how a dynamically biblical worldview might be able to remain transformational. And I will make these comments in reverse order to the five points just enumerated, though I will make no further attempt to work with the TULIP acronym.

1. If a sure sign that a worldview has become an ideology is when that worldview serves to legitimate an exclusive and self-enclosed community animated by a protective ethos, then a dynamically biblical worldview is formative of a community characterized by **hospitality**. Parker Palmer says that “hospitality means receiving each other with openness and care.”¹⁵ Hospitality is

¹⁵ *To Know as We are Known: A Spirituality of Education* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), p. 73. A comprehensive and evocative study of hospitality in the Christian tradition is Christine D. Pohl's, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999). A creative application of the theme of hospitality to education, specifically foriegn

the opposite of a fearful protectionism. And an educational community that is rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ, a gospel characterized by fellowship with sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes and the unclean, must be a community that dares to risk similar fellowship in our own very different context. A community formed and continually reformed by a radically biblical worldview is secure enough in the power of love, reconciliation and grace - indeed, in the power of its Lord - that it dares to risk hospitality to people of other faiths, other worldviews, and dares to risk hospitality to ideas, issues and questions that might make members of the community uncomfortable. Indeed, it is precisely through such risky hospitality that the worldview is often kept open. This leads to my second point.

2. Ideology is such a devastating betrayal of a transformational worldview precisely because it results in cultural irrelevance. Most of us were drawn to transformational ways of living and thinking, however, because this seemed to us to be a more culturally attuned and relevant expression of Christian faith. If we are to maintain and foster the continued vitality and dynamism of such a transformational worldview, then, our worldview and the educational manifestations of that worldview must be driven by a **passionate and prophetic imagination** that has the courage and the creativity to engage a changing cultural reality.¹⁶ This does not mean that we seek relevance for the sake of relevance. Rather, we will engage in a dynamic cultural and educational praxis that will be subversively relevant to the cultural and educational ideologies of our time. This is a prophetic imagination because it seeks to engage in prophetic discernment and critique and to raise up Christian young people

language teaching is found in David I Smith and Barbara Carvill, *The Gift of the Stranger: Faith, Hospitality, and Foreign Language Learning* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

¹⁶ See Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).

with such a discerning spirit. And it is a passionate imagination both because it cuts through the numbness of early twenty-first century culture and because it is an imagination driven and directed by a God who loves the world - our world - so much that he gives his only Son to die for that world. Ours is a passionate imagination because we are subjects of a king who was enthroned on a cross.¹⁷

3. All of this means that a dynamically biblical worldview is only dynamically biblical insofar as it maintains a **dynamic engagement with Scripture**. Biblical reflection is foundational to all of Christian life, education included. But this requires an ongoing serious, passionate and loving engagement with Scripture. And this must be an engagement that allows our reading of Scripture to be full of questions and to be patient enough not to demand answers too quickly. The Bible as-an-easy-answer-book-of-theological-orthodoxy, or quick-manual-of-moral-absolutes, or compendium-of-timeless-truths is, I suggest the first step to ideology and a lost biblical dynamism.¹⁸ What I am talking about is an indwelling of the biblical narrative in such a way that this story, with all of its tensions, plot confusions and dead-ends, and in all of its historical oddities, is, nonetheless *our* story. We find our identity as the people of God in this narrative, it shapes our character and it forms our vision.

4. But, fourthly, we need to remember that a community formed in such a way by a text is, by definition, an interpretive community. Yes we are a biblical community and we want to root our lives in a biblical worldview, but the bible is a book, and books require interpretation. It is, therefore, highly inappropriate that we should ever claim universal finality for our worldview. Such finality is impossible when it comes to interpretation. We need to acknowledge that

¹⁷ See N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK 1996), especially chapter 12 (sections 5, 6, 7).

¹⁸ See N. T. Wright, "How Can the Bible be Authoritative?" *Vox Evangelica* 21 (1991).

worldviews, and the interpretations on which they are based, are not handed down, complete from heaven. Rather, interpretation is something people do in community, in relation to tradition and in a particular time and place. And that means that **worldviews are in fact constructed in community and in history**. The worldview that Middleton and I articulated in *The Transforming Vision* is timed. It was rooted in a Dutch reformational tradition that we had come into contact with at the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto. It was formed and developed in a Canadian context during the Reagan administration in the United States. It was written by two guys who were pretty sure of themselves, and who listened to a lot of Bruce Cockburn, etc. etc. It is a construct - a way of thinking, a way of being, a way of viewing the world and living in that world that was constructed at a particular time and place. And we do well never to forget that constructed character of worldviews. It keeps us from ever concluding that our worldview represents universal finality, it keeps us open to other worldviews and their insights into God's creation, and it keeps us humble.

Forming worldviews is part and parcel of our call to be stewards of God's good creation. You can't be a steward of a garden, or a city, or a culture - all of which are changing over time in history - without a worldview, a foundationally guiding orientation. And just as we must never absolutize any agricultural, cultural or civilizational form, so also must we never absolutize our worldview constructs. Rather, we attempt to be faithful in all that we do - including our formation of a worldview. And since the world has not come to universal finality, neither can our worldviews.

5. Finally, I began this whole enterprise by saying that when a dynamically biblical worldview is taken to be a total system then we are on the path of an intellectualistically conceived ideology. It is, therefore, important that we remember that a biblical worldview is, at heart, not a system at all - it is a

dynamic story. A biblical worldview is a **storied vision of and for life**. Harry Fernhout has wisely argued that story is the matrix of worldview and “that if a story is to remain vibrant and formative, there must be a community of people capable of remembering and reinterpreting that story” in such a way that the community is “capable of ordering their new experience in a manner consistent with their story.”¹⁹ But there is the rub. A storied vision of and for life, a narratively-formed worldview, can only remain vital if that story is adaptable to changing historical conditions. The story requires fresh reinterpretation if it is not to become a dead tradition. Sylvia Keesmaat puts it this way:

When tradition is handed on unchanged it loses its potency and has little meaning for the present. Some would go so far as to say that an unchanged tradition is dead, it has been killed. The only way for a tradition to be fertile and alive is for a transformation to occur.²⁰

So how can we guard against a transformational worldview becoming an ideology? By so indwelling the biblical narrative of suffering love that we not only allow, but expect, our transformational worldview itself to be continually transformed.²¹

¹⁹ “Christian Schooling: Telling a Worldview Story,” in *The Crumbling Walls of Certainty*, p. 86. Fernhout is dependent here on Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

²⁰ *Paul and His Story: (Re)Interpreting the Exodus Tradition* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), pp. 20-21.

²¹ For a further articulation of the implications of this argument for biblical authority see my article, “Reimagining Biblical Authority,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 26,2 (1996). See also *Truth is Stranger than it Used to be*, especially chapters 5 and 8.