

# TOTAL TRUTH

BY NANCY PEARCEY

BREAKING OUT OF THE GRID



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*Sundays were Sundays,  
with the rest of the week largely detached,  
operating by a different set of rules.  
Can these two worlds that seem so separate ever merge?*  
John Beckett<sup>1</sup>

A fashionably dressed college student stepped into the counselor's office, tossing her head in an attempt at bravado. Sarah recognized the type. The Planned Parenthood clinic where she worked often attracted students from the elite university nearby, and most were wealthy, privileged, and self-confident.

"Please sit down. I have your test result . . . and you are pregnant."

The young woman nodded and grimaced. "I kind of thought so."

"Have you thought about what you want to do?" Sarah asked.

The answer was quick and sure. "I want an abortion."

"Let's go over your options first," Sarah said, "It's important for you to think through all the possibilities before you leave today."

Sometimes the young women sitting in her office would grow impatient, even hostile. They had already convinced themselves that there *were* no other viable options. After years of experience in her profession, however, Sarah knew that women who have abortions are often haunted afterward. She hoped to help the students consider the impact an abortion might have in years to come, so they would make an informed decision. If they balked, she fell back on protocol: "This is my job, I have to do it."

Why did Sarah care? Because she was a practicing Christian, as she explained to me many years later,<sup>2</sup> and she thought that's what being a believer meant—showing compassion to women who were considering abortion. Nor was she alone: The Planned Parenthood clinic where she worked was located in the Bible belt, and virtually all the women on staff were regular church-goers. During breaks they would discuss things like their Bible study groups or their children's Sunday school programs.

Sarah's story illustrates how even sincere believers may find themselves drawn into a secular worldview—while remaining orthodox in their theological beliefs. Sarah had grown up in a solidly evangelical denomination. As a teenager, she had undergone a crisis of faith and had emerged from it with a fresh confidence. "I still have the white Bible my grandmother gave me back then," she told me. "I underlined all the passages on how to be sure you were saved." From then on, she never doubted the basic biblical doctrines.

So how did she end up working at Planned Parenthood and referring women for abortion? Something happened to Sarah when she went off to college. There she was immersed in the liberal relativism taught on most campuses today. In courses on sociology, anthropology, and philosophy, it was simply assumed that truth is culturally relative—that

ideas and beliefs emerge historically by cultural forces, and are not true or false in any final sense.

And Christianity? It was treated as irrelevant to the world of scholarship. "In a class on moral philosophy, the professor presented every possible theory, from existentialism to utilitarianism, but never said a word about Christian moral theory—even though it's been the dominant religion all through Western history," Sarah recalled. "It was as though Christianity were so irrational, it didn't even merit being listed alongside the other moral theories."

Yet Sarah had no idea how to respond to these assaults on her faith. Her church had helped her find assurance of salvation, but it had *not* provided her with any intellectual resources to challenge the ideologies taught in her classes. The church's teaching had assumed a sharp divide between the sacred and secular realms, addressing itself solely to Sarah's religious life. As a result, over time she found herself absorbing the secular outlook taught in her classes. Her mental world was split, with religion strictly contained within the boundaries of worship and personal morality, while her views on everything else were run through a grid of naturalism and relativism.

"I may have started out picking up bits and pieces of a secular worldview to sprinkle on top of my Christian beliefs," Sarah explained. "But after I graduated and worked for Planned Parenthood, the pattern was reversed: My Christianity was reduced to a thin veneer over the core of a secular worldview. *It was almost like having a split personality.*" Her mind had absorbed the divided concepts of truth characteristic of Western culture: secular/sacred, fact/value, public/private. Though her faith was sincere, it was reduced to purely private experience, while public knowledge was defined in terms of secular naturalism.

Sarah's story is particularly dramatic, yet it illustrates a pattern that is more common than we might like to think. The fatal weakness in her faith was that she had accepted Christian doctrines strictly as individual items of belief: the deity of Christ, His virgin birth, His miracles, His resurrection from the dead—she could tick them off one by one. But she lacked any sense of how Christianity functions as a unified, overarching system of truth that applies to social issues, history, politics, anthropology, and all the other subject areas. In short, she lacked a Christian worldview. She held to Christianity as a collection of truths, but not as Truth.<sup>3</sup>

Only many years later, after a personal crisis, were Sarah's relativistic views finally challenged. "When Congress held hearings on partial-birth abortion, I was appalled. And I realized that if abortion was wrong at nine months, then it was wrong at eight months, and wrong at seven months, and six months—right back to the beginning." It was a shattering experience, and Sarah found she had to take apart her secular worldview plank by plank, and then begin painstakingly constructing a Christian worldview in its place. It was tough work, yet today she is discovering the joy of breaking out of the trap of the secular/sacred split, and seeing her faith come alive in areas where before she had not even known it applied. She is learning that Christianity is not just religious truth, it is total truth—covering all of reality.



## Divided Minds

Like Sarah, many believers have absorbed the fact/value, public/private dichotomy, restricting their faith to the religious sphere while adopting whatever views are current in their professional or social circles. We probably all know of Christian teachers who uncritically accept the latest secular theories of education; Christian businessmen who run their operations by accepted secular management theories; Christian ministries that mirror the commercial world's marketing techniques; Christian families where the teenagers watch the same movies and listen to the same music as their nonbelieving friends. While sincere in their faith, they have absorbed their views on just about everything else by osmosis from the surrounding culture.

The problem was phrased succinctly by Harry Blamires in his classic book *The Christian Mind*. When I was a new Christian many years ago, Blamires's book was almost a fad item, and everyone walked around intoning its dramatic opening sentence: "There is no longer a Christian mind."<sup>4</sup>

What did Blamires mean? He was not saying that Christians are uneducated, backwoods hayseeds, though that remains a common stereotype in the secular world. A few years ago an infamous article in the *Washington Post* described conservative Christians as "poor, uneducated, and easily led."<sup>5</sup> Immediately the *Post* was overwhelmed with calls and faxes from Christians across the country, listing their advanced degrees and bank account balances!

But if that's not what Blamires meant, what *did* he mean? To say there is no Christian mind means that believers may be highly educated in terms of technical proficiency, and yet have no biblical worldview for interpreting the subject matter of their field. "We speak of 'the modern mind' and of 'the scientific mind,' using that word *mind* of a collectively accepted set of notions and attitudes," Blamires explains. But there is no "Christian mind"—no shared, biblically based set of assumptions on subjects like law, education, economics, politics, science, or the arts. As a moral being, the Christian follows the biblical ethic. As a spiritual being, he or she prays and attends worship services. "But as a *thinking* being, the modern Christian has succumbed to secularism," accepting "a frame of reference constructed by the secular mind and a set of criteria reflecting secular evaluations."<sup>6</sup> That is, when we enter the stream of discourse in our field or profession, we participate mentally as non-Christians, using the current concepts and categories, no matter what our private beliefs may be.

Living in the Washington, D.C., area, I have witnessed firsthand the growing numbers of believers working in politics today, which is an encouraging trend. But I can also say from experience that few hold an explicitly Christian political philosophy. As a congressional chief of staff once admitted, "I realize that I hold certain views because I'm politically conservative, *not* because I see how they're rooted in the Bible." He knew he should formulate a biblically based philosophy of government, but he simply didn't know how to proceed.

Similarly, through decades of writing on science and worldview, I have interacted with scientists who are deeply committed believers; yet few have crafted a biblically informed philosophy of science. In Christian ministries, I've met many who take great pains to make sure their *message* is biblical, but who never think to ask whether their *methods* are biblical. A journalism professor recently told me that even the best Christian journalists—sincere believers with outstanding professional skills—typically have no Christian theory of journalism. In popular culture, believers have constructed an

entire parallel culture of artists and entertainers; yet even so, as Charlie Peacock laments, few "think Christianly" about art and aesthetics.<sup>7</sup> The phrase is borrowed from Blamires, and when I addressed a group of artists and musicians in Charlie's home, he showed me a shelf with half a dozen copies of Blamires's book—enough to lend out to several friends at once.

"Thinking Christianly" means understanding that Christianity gives the truth about the whole of reality, a perspective for interpreting every subject matter. Genesis tells us that God spoke the entire universe into being with His Word—what John 1:1 calls the *Logos*. The Greek word means not only Word but also reason or rationality, and the ancient Stoics used it to mean the rational structure of the universe. Thus the underlying structure of the entire universe reflects the mind of the Creator. There is no fact/value dichotomy in the scriptural account. Nothing has an autonomous or independent identity, separate from the will of the Creator. As a result, all creation must be interpreted in light of its relationship to God. In any subject area we study, we are discovering the laws or creation ordinances by which God structured the world.

As Scripture puts it, the universe speaks of God—"the heavens declare the glory of God" (Ps. 19:1)—because His character is reflected in the things He has made. This is sometimes referred to as "general" revelation because it speaks to everyone at all times, in contrast to the "special" revelation given in the Bible. As Jonathan Edwards explained, God communicates not only "by his voice to us in the Scriptures" but also in creation and in historical events. Indeed, "the whole creation of God preaches."<sup>8</sup> Yet it is possible for Christians to

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be deaf and blind to the message of general revelation, and part of learning to have the mind of Christ involves praying for the spiritual sensitivity to “hear” the preaching of creation.

The great historian of religion Martin Marty once said every religion serves two functions: First, it is a message of personal salvation, telling us how to get right with God; and second, it is a lens for interpreting the world. Historically, evangelicals have been good at the first function—at “saving souls.” But they have not been nearly as good at helping people to interpret the world around them—at providing a set of interrelated concepts that function as a lens to give a biblical view of areas like science, politics, economics, or bioethics. As Marty puts it, evangelicals have typically “accented personal piety and individual salvation, leaving men to their own devices to interpret the world around them.”

In fact, many no longer think it’s even the *function* of Christianity to provide an interpretation of the world. Marty calls this the Modern Schism (in a book by that title), and he says we are living in the first time in history where Christianity has been boxed into the private sphere and has largely stopped speaking to the public sphere.<sup>9</sup>

“This internalization or privatization of religion is one of the most momentous changes that has ever taken place in Christendom,” writes another historian, Sidney Mead.<sup>10</sup> As a result, our lives are often fractured and fragmented, with our faith firmly locked into the private realm of church and family, where it rarely has a chance to inform our life and work in the public realm. The aura of worship dissipates after Sunday, and we unconsciously absorb secular attitudes the rest of the week. We inhabit two separate “worlds,” navigating a sharp divide between our religious life and ordinary life.

## Biblical Toolbox

What is the antidote to the secular/sacred divide? How do we make sure our toolbox contains biblically based conceptual

tools for every issue we encounter? We must begin by being utterly convinced that there is a biblical perspective on everything—not just on spiritual matters. The Old Testament tells us repeatedly that “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Ps. 111:10; Prov. 1:7; 9:10; 15:33). Similarly, the New Testament teaches that in Christ are “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:3). We often interpret these verses to mean spiritual wisdom only, but the text places no limitation on the term. “Most people have a tendency to read these passages as though they say that the fear of the Lord is the foundation of religious knowledge,” writes Clouser. “But the fact is that they make a very radical claim—the claim that somehow all knowledge depends upon religious truth.”<sup>11</sup>

This claim is easier to grasp when we realize that Christianity is not unique in this regard. All belief systems work the same way. As we saw earlier, whatever a system puts forth as self-existing is essentially what it regards as divine. And that religious commitment functions as the controlling principle for everything that follows. The fear of some “god” is the beginning of every proposed system of knowledge.

Once we understand how first principles work, then it becomes clear that all truth must begin with God. The only self-existent reality is God, and everything else depends on Him for its origin and continued existence. Nothing exists apart from His will; nothing falls outside the scope of the central turning points in biblical history: Creation, Fall, and Redemption.

## Creation

The Christian message does not begin with “accept Christ as your Savior”; it begins with “in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” The Bible teaches that God is the sole source of the entire created order. No other gods compete with Him; no natural forces exist on their own; nothing receives its

nature or existence from another source. Thus His word, or laws, or creation ordinances give the world its order and structure. God’s creative word is the source of the laws of *physical* nature, which we study in the natural sciences. It is

also the source of the laws of *human* nature—the principles of morality (ethics), of justice (politics), of creative enterprise (economic), of aesthetics (the arts), and even of clear thinking (logic). That’s why Psalm 119:91 says, “all things are your servants.” There is no philosophically or spiritually neutral subject matter.

## Fall

**All truth must begin with God. The only self-existent reality is God.... Nothing exists apart from His will; nothing falls outside the scope of the central turning points in biblical history: Creation, Fall, and Redemption.**



The universality of Creation is matched by the universality of the Fall. The Bible teaches that all parts of creation—including our minds—are caught up in a great rebellion against the Creator. Theologians call this the “noetic” effect of the Fall (the effect on the mind), and it subverts our ability to understand the world apart from God’s regenerating grace. Scripture is replete with warnings that idolatry or willful disobedience toward God makes humans “blind” or “deaf.” Paul writes, “The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel” (2 Cor. 4:4). Sin literally “darkens” the understanding (Eph. 4:18).<sup>12</sup>

Of course, nonbelievers still function in God’s world, bear God’s image, and are upheld by God’s common grace, which means they are capable of uncovering isolated segments of genuine knowledge. And Christians should welcome those insights. All truth is God’s truth, as the church fathers used to say; and they urged Christians to “plunder the Egyptians” by appropriating the best of secular scholarship, showing how it actually fits best within a biblical worldview. There may even be occasions when Christians are mistaken on some point while nonbelievers get it right. Nevertheless, the overall systems of thought constructed by nonbelievers will be false—for if the system is not built on biblical truth, then it will be built on some other ultimate principle. Even individual truths will be seen through the distorting lens of a false worldview. As a result, a Christian approach to any field needs to be both critical and constructive. We cannot simply borrow from the results of secular scholarship as though that were spiritually neutral territory discovered by people whose minds are completely open and objective—that is, as though the Fall had never happened.

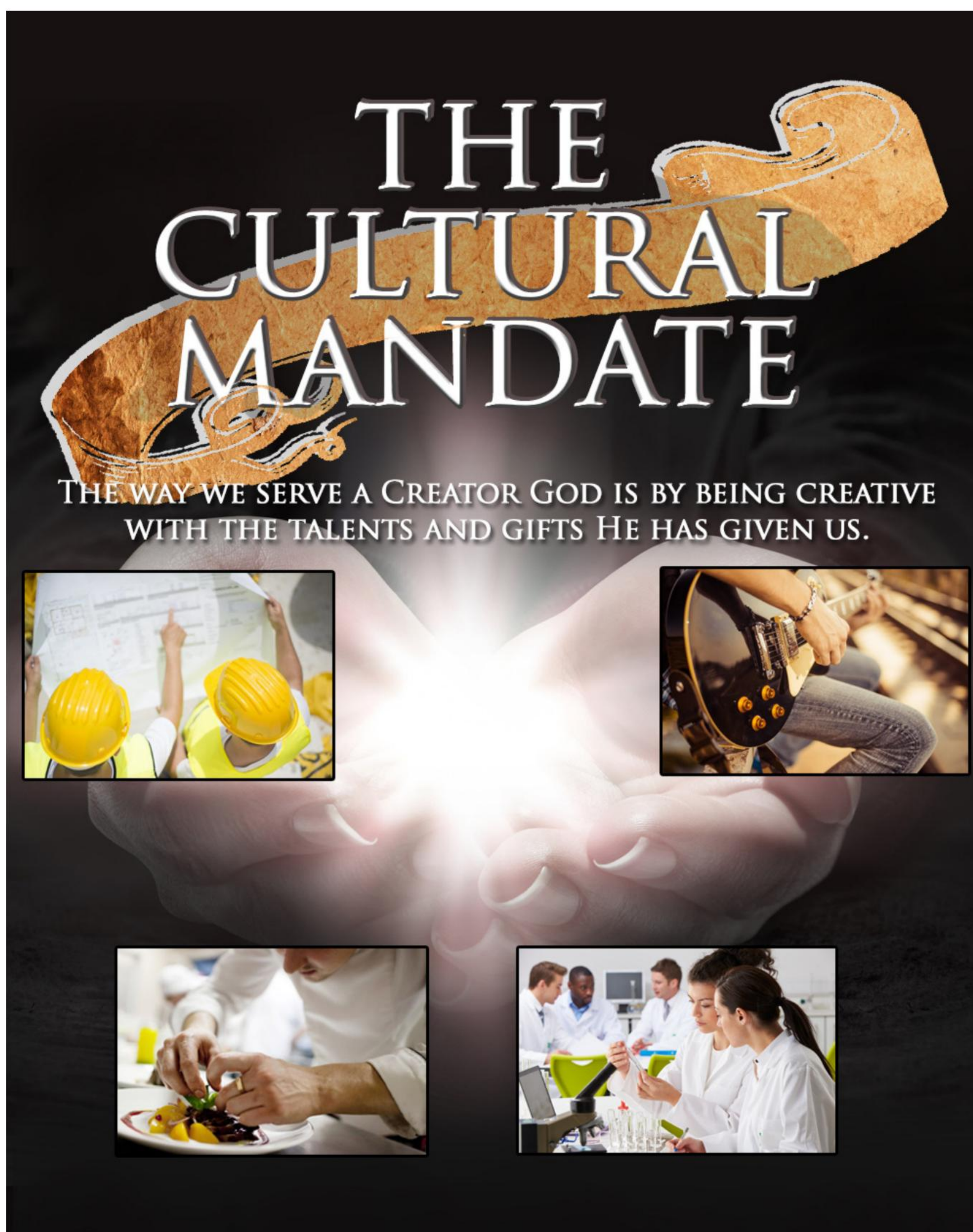
### Redemption

Finally, Redemption is as comprehensive as Creation and Fall. God does not save only our souls, while leaving our minds to function on their own. He redeems the whole person. Conversion is meant to give new direction to our thoughts, emotions, will, and habits. Paul urges us to offer up our entire selves to God as “living sacrifices,” so that we will not be “conformed to this world” but be “transformed by the renewal of [our] minds” (Rom. 12:12). When we are redeemed, *all things* are made new (2 Cor. 5:17). God promises to give

us “a new heart, and a new spirit” (Ezek. 36:26), animating our entire character with new life.

This explains why the Bible treats sin primarily as a matter of turning away from God and serving other gods, and only secondarily in terms of lists of specific immoral behaviors. The first commandment is, after all, the *first* commandment—the rest follows only *after* we are straight about whom or what it is that we are worshiping. By the same token, redemption consists primarily in casting out our mental idols and turning back to the true God. And when we do that, we will experience His transforming power renewing every aspect of our lives. To talk about a Christian worldview is simply another way of saying that when we are redeemed, our entire outlook on life is re-centered on God and re-built on His revealed truth.

### Read the Directions





How do we go about constructing a Christian worldview? The key passage is the creation account in Genesis, because that's where we are taken back to the beginning to learn what God's original purpose was in creating the human race. With the entrance of sin, humans went off course, lost their way, wandered off the path. But when we accept Christ's salvation, we are put back on the right path and are restored to our original purpose. Redemption is not just about being saved *from* sin, it is also being saved to something—to resume the task for which we were originally created.

And what was that task? In Genesis, God gives what

This was God's purpose when He originally created human beings, and it remains His purpose for us today. God's original plan was not abrogated by the Fall. Sin has corrupted every aspect of human nature, but it has not made us less than human. We are not animals. We still reflect, "through a glass, darkly" (1 Cor. 13:12, KJV), our original nature as God's image-bearer. Even nonbelievers carry out the Cultural Mandate: They "multiply and fill the earth"—which is to say, they get married, raise families, start schools, run businesses. And they "cultivate the earth"—they fix cars, write books, study nature, invent new gadgets.

## Our vocation or professional work is not a second-class activity, something we do just to put food on the table. It is the high calling for which we were originally created.

we might call the first job description: "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it." The first phrase, "be fruitful and multiply," means to develop the *social* world; build families, churches, schools, cities, governments, laws. The second phrase, "subdue the earth," means to harness the natural world: plant crops, build bridges, design computers, compose music. This passage is sometimes called the Cultural Mandate because it tell us that our original purpose was to create cultures, build civilizations—nothing less.<sup>13</sup>

This means that our vocation or professional work is not a second-class activity, something we do just to put food on the table. It is the high calling for which we were originally created. The way we serve a Creator God is by being creative with the talents and gifts He has given us. We could even say that we are called to continue God's own creative work. Of course, we do not create from nothing, *ex nihilo*, as God did; our job is to develop the powers and potentials that God originally built into the creation—using wood to build houses, cotton to make clothes, or silicon to make computer chips. Though modern social and economic institutions are not explicitly referred to in the Garden of Eden, their biblical justification is rooted in the Cultural Mandate.

In the first six days of the Genesis narrative, God forms then fills the physical universe—the sky with the sun and moon, the sea with its swimming creatures, the earth with its land animals. Then the narrative pauses, as though to emphasize that the next step will be the culmination of all that has gone before. This is the only stage in the creative process when God announces His plan ahead of time, when the members of the Trinity consult with one another: Let Us make a creature in Our image, who will represent Us and carry on Our work on earth (see Gen. 1:26). Then God creates the first human couple, to have dominion over the earth and govern it in His name.

It is obvious from the text that humans are not supreme rulers, autonomously free to do whatever they wish. Their dominion is a delegated authority: They are representatives of the Supreme Ruler, called to reflect His holy and loving care for creation. They are to "cultivate" the earth—a word that has the same root as "culture." The way we express the image of God is by being creative and building cultures.

After I spoke at a conference, a young woman said to me, "When you talk about the Cultural Mandate, you're not talking about anything distinctively Christian; these are things everybody does." But that's precisely the point: Genesis is telling us our true nature, the things we can't help doing, the way God created everyone to function. Our purpose is precisely to fulfill our God-given nature.

The Fall did not destroy our original calling, but only made it more difficult. Our work is now marked by sorrow and hard labor. In Genesis 3:16 and 17, the Hebrew uses the same word for the "labor" of childbearing and the "labor" of growing food. The text suggests that the two central tasks of adulthood—raising the next generation and making a living—will be fraught with the pain of living in a fallen and fractured world. All our efforts will be twisted and misdirected by sin and selfishness.

Yet when God redeems us, He releases us from the guilt and power of sin and restores us to our full humanity, so that we can once again carry out the tasks for which we were created. Because of Christ's redemption on the cross, our work takes on a new aspect as well—it becomes a means of sharing in His redemptive purposes. In cultivating creation, we not only recover our original purpose but also bring a redemptive force to reverse the evil and corruption introduced by the Fall. We offer our gifts to God to participate in making His Kingdom come, His will be done. With hearts and minds renewed, our work can now be inspired by love for God and delight in His service.

The lesson of the Cultural Mandate is that our sense of fulfillment depends on engaging in creative, constructive work. The ideal human existence is not eternal leisure or an endless vacation—or even a monastic retreat into prayer and meditation—but creative effort expended for the glory of God and the benefit of others. Our calling is not just to "get to heaven" but also to cultivate the earth, not just to "save souls" but also to serve God through our work. For God Himself is engaged not only in the work of salvation (special grace) but also in the work of preserving and developing His creation (common grace). When we obey the Cultural Mandate, we participate in the work of God Himself, as agents of His common grace.



This is the rich content that should come to mind when we hear the word *Redemption*. The term does not refer only to a one-time conversion event. It means entering upon a lifelong quest to devote our skills and talents to building things that are beautiful and useful, while fighting the forces of evil and sin that oppress and distort the creation. *How Now Shall We Live?* added a fourth category—Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration—to emphasize the theme of ongoing vocation. Some theologians suggest the fourth category should be *Glorification*, to call to mind our final goal of living in the new heavens and new earth, for which our work here is a preparation. Whatever term we use, being a Christian means embarking on a lifelong process of growth in grace, both in our personal lives (sanctification) and in our vocation (cultural renewal). The new heavens and new earth will be a continuation of the creation we know now—purified by fire, but recognizably the same, just as Jesus was recognizable in His resurrection body. As C.S. Lewis puts it at the end of his Narnia tales, we have started a great adventure story that will never end. It is the “Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.”<sup>14</sup>

## About the Author



**Nancy Pearcey** has authored several books, including *Saving Leonardo* and the bestselling Gold Medallion Award winner *Total Truth* (Crossway, 2004). Hailed in *The Economist* as “America’s pre-eminent evangelical Protestant female intellectual,” Pearcey has lectured widely

on university campuses and has been featured on national TV, on radio, and in the nationally released 2014 Focus on the Family film *Irreplaceable*. Currently Pearcey is a professor and scholar in residence at HBU, as well as director of the Francis Schaeffer Center for Worldview and Culture and editor at large of The Pearcey Report. A student of the late Francis Schaeffer at L’Abri, Pearcey holds an M.A. in Biblical Studies from Covenant Theological Seminary and an honorary doctorate from Cairn University.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> John D. Beckett, *Loving Monday: Succeeding in Business Without Selling Your Soul* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998), 52.

<sup>2</sup> “Sarah,” in discussion with the author. The name has been changed to protect her privacy, but otherwise the story is completely true and accurate.

<sup>3</sup> Francis Schaeffer explains this phenomenon in *A Christian Manifesto*, in *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer*, vol. 5 (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1982), 424-425. “Many Christians do not mean what I mean when I say Christianity is true, or Truth. They are Christians and they believe in, let us say, the truth of creation, the truth of the virgin birth, the truth of Christ’s miracles, Christ’s substitutionary death, and His coming again. But they stop there with these and other individual truths. When I say Christianity is true I mean it is true to total reality – the total of what is....Christianity is not just a series of truths but Truth – Truth about all of reality.”

<sup>4</sup> Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind* (New York: Seabury, 1963), 3, emphasis added.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Weiskopf, “Energized by Pulpit or Passion, the Public is Calling: ‘Gospel Grapevine’ Displays Strength in Controversy Over Military Gay Ban,” *The Washington Post*, February 1, 1993, A1.

<sup>6</sup> Blamires, *Christian Mind*, 3-4, emphasis in original.

<sup>7</sup> Charlie Peacock, *At the Crossroads: An Insider’s Look at the Past, Present, and Future of Contemporary Christian Music* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Cited in Allen C. Guelzo, “The Return of the Will,” in *Edwards in Our Time: Jonathan Edwards and the Shaping of American Religion*, ed. Sang Hyun Lee and Allen C. Guelzo (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999), 133.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Marty, *The Modern Schism: Three Paths to the Secular* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 40. See also 57, 92, 96.

<sup>10</sup> Sidney Mead, *The Old Religion in the Brave New World: Reflections on the Relation Between Christendom and the Republic* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977), 4.

<sup>11</sup> Roy Clouser, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality: An Essay on the Hidden Role of Religious Belief in Theories* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 80.

<sup>12</sup> Other passages on this theme include Isaiah 6:9-10; 42:18-20; 43:8; Matthew 15:14; 23:16ff; 2 Peter 1:9.

<sup>13</sup> When I lecture on the Cultural Mandate, many people say that they have never encountered the concept before. Thus readers may benefit from my more detailed treatment of the Cultural Mandate in “Saved to What?” chapter 31 in Charles Colson and Nancy Pearcey, *How Now Shall We Live?* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 1999).

<sup>14</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 211.