
The Making of a Worldview

A Christian Perspective of Life and Destiny

John M. Fowler

Everyone has a worldview, whether he realizes it or not. When the founding fathers of the United States of America declared that "all men are created equal," they were expressing the basis for a worldview whose vision of life has governed the American dream and inspired many others for the past 200 years. When Ghandi announced that the moral right of the human soul to be free can be asserted through non-violence and civil disobedience, he was forging a worldview in which freedom and dignity drew up the parameters of life. A Bombay beggar sees in a bowl of rice the reflection of heaven; a Wall Street broker feels the world is unfair because at the end of the day he could not corner all that he planned. Each man has his world, and each looks at it in a particular way.

What Is Worldview?

What exactly is worldview?

First, worldview provides a point of departure. Anything done meaningfully must have a starting point. When a person says "I believe," "I am committed to," "I expect to," "I anticipate," he is describing a point of departure. Once this is clarified, destination and direction take shape, and one's world begins to take a certain mold.

Second, worldview answers the basic questions of life. Like philosophy, worldview must ask and answer questions that deal with issues of reality, truth, ethics, and history.

Reality raises questions of an ultimate nature. Is God real? Is humanity real? Does the tree on the corner of the street make up a

part of reality. Or is there something that transcends trees and human beings that constitutes reality? Would that transcending principle be—God, idea or just *is-ness*? These questions are germane to the construction of a worldview.

The second area of interest for worldview is the question of epistemology. How do we know anything? How do we know that something is true or untrue? Is what is true always true? What are the conditions and limitations of knowledge? Are human beings alone responsible for the creation, certification, and verification of truth? Does truth differ from person to person, from situation to situation, from time to time? Is truth relative or absolute, objective or subjective, related to or independent of experience?

The third area of concern in worldview construction is the question of axiology, which has to do with ethics and aesthetics. Ethics relate to the question of what is good. How do we define the appropriateness of conduct? Is there a norm for human conduct? Where is the locus of that norm—within or outside humanity? Is that norm relative or absolute? What is the source of that norm—tradition, social mores, current practices, situation, religion, authority?

In addition to such ethical questions, worldview must also answer the issue of aesthetics. What is beauty? Is beauty really in the eyes of the beholder? Could it be in the object itself? What makes a piece of art enjoyable—its magnificent colors, its social message, its call to inner reflection, its projection of a supreme ideal or person? How is beauty to be related to a responsible ecology? How does one re-

late to the thorn and the rose, the palm and the desert, the lion and the lamb, the storm and the calm, the beautiful and the ugly within the concept of a unified worldview?

Third, worldview must also provide meaning and purpose for human existence in the continuum of history. Worldview must not be content with answering questions of reality, knowledge and ethics. It must address the issue of the origin, nature and destiny of the human race in the historic and existential contingencies of life. Who am I? Where did I come from? What am I doing? Where am I going? How am I related to the other people I see around? Is there something wrong with me? What is death, and what is after death? What was I before I came? Will I always be around? Am I an accident of history? Is history just a series of random events? Or is it purposive? The way one answers these questions within the framework of a chosen worldview either condemns him to be a helpless creature of historical forces or a master over those forces, empowered to move toward a teleological destiny.

Limitations of Worldview

The very nature of human beings and the reasons a person constructs a worldview—to provide unity of thought and action—should offer a warning about illusions of infallibility. This in itself calls for an attitude of humility and openness. Humility is a necessary prerequisite to any human endeavor. This is even more so in such a far-reaching task as constructing a worldview. But humility is not scepticism; rather it is an at-

titude of mind, a perception that the task we approach is greater than ourselves, and that we cannot understand all the issues or surmount all the hurdles that make up our complicated world.

In addition, the shared consciousness and the mutual meaning inherent in a worldview constitute a warning against overzealous rigidity. Comprehension of reality and the avenue of truth have an element of both arrival and reaching out, both near and distant, both understanding and mystery. Openness, therefore, is essential in the construction and advocacy of worldviews.

Constructing a Worldview

A worldview is governed by the basic postulate or root belief the person chooses to adopt. That root belief may vary with each worldview. The rightness or the wrongness of the approach is revealed in the faithfulness, coherence, and unity with which the worldview system is built in relationship with its basic assumptions. To the extent its presuppositions are not adequately defined and seriously taken, the worldview may be defective and unreliable, and may show signs of possible breakdown. Every statement made, every argument presented, every postulate advanced, and every conclusion reached must reflect the intent and the purpose of the foundational stance. As our example, we will consider idealism, expounded by Plato.

Plato's basic point of departure is the Universal Mind. His worldview is made up of pure ideas. Plato would say that everything we experience is only a limited expression of an underlying idea. Thus the idea of a "tree-ness" is real, while the tree is only a shadow of the real; the idea of "human-ness" is real, while a human being is only a reflection of the idea. Behind all these ideas there ought to be an Infinite, Absolute Idea. That Universal Mind,

says Plato, is what constitutes reality.

Once that basic belief is expounded, Plato constructs his vision of life, with every part somehow relating to the world of the pure mind. Thus Plato's epistemology is also one in which truth is grasped by mind alone. Sense perception, experience, and utility are all secondary, and truth exists, not because of these, but in spite of them.

Likewise the idealist ethic is the reflection of the Absolute Ideal. Values and ethics are absolute. The good, the true, and the beautiful do not vary from age to age. They are not man-made but are part of the common nature of the universe. On the other hand, evil is looked upon by the idealist as incomplete good, and is a result of disorganization and lack of system still present in the universe.

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Thus the idea becomes the cornerstone of an idealist worldview. The idealist vision of world and life is governed by the preeminence and compulsions of the mind.

Someone other than Plato might look at the idealist worldview and discover that he cannot accept it. He might seriously question its conclusions. To such objections, whether they are true or not, the idealist would reply that his construct must be judged only by the presuppositions and claims with which he began. In effect, such presuppositions are his faith-claims; another person is free to accept or reject such claims. It is because of this rooting in beliefs that worldview theorists like Walsh and Middleton argue that a religious base and a faith framework can be detected in all

worldviews:

Faith is an essential part of human life. Humans are confessing, believing and trusting creatures. And where we place our faith determines the worldview which we will adopt. Put another way, our ultimate faith commitment sets the contours of our worldview. People who doubt their worldview are restless and feel they have no ground to stand on. They are often in the throes of a psychological crisis. But that emotional crisis is fundamentally religious because our worldview rests on a faith commitment.¹

Our idealist, therefore, finds certitude in his faith commitment; and out of certitude, a ground to stand, and a direction to move. On such a basis, he continues his preoccupations and pursuits. But he does have a problem: he is confronted by other worldviews—materialism, which interprets life in terms of the tangible; romanticism, which considers nature as the mother of reality and the fountain of vitality; humanism, which considers that both the beautiful and the ugly in the universe can be understood and mastered by the capacity for transcendence and failure within human beings; eastern mysticism, which looks upon existence and non existence as two sides of the same coin on its endless journey; and many others.

What would be the result of such a confrontation? Our idealist can give up, modify, redefine, or reassert his worldview, and thereby his faith commitment. Indeed, constructing a worldview and constantly referring to it in the pursuit of life are both inescapable and necessary.

This leads us to the most important question that we must ask ourselves as Christians. If deliberate construction of a worldview is so essential to an idealist, a materialist, a humanist, or a marxist, how much more so for the Christian who makes extraordi-

nary claims both for himself and for the universe, for now and eternity.

Constructing a Christian Worldview

The New Testament knows no hesitation about its worldview. The opening of the Gospel of John is one example of the completeness and clarity with which the apostles formulated the Christian worldview:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father (John 1:1-3, 14, RSV).²

The Christ-centered worldview that emerges from this confessional statement is so complete that it leaves no one in doubt as to where the confessor stands.

And what is the end effect of such a worldview? The apostle would say: I know who I am, for Christ has enlightened me; I know what I could become—a child of God; I know where I am going—to share his fullness, "grace upon grace" (John 1:9-13, 16).

What the early church saw in the coming of Christ was thus a new worldview, and not simply an improvement of the old classical system. It was a confrontation between two kingdoms, between two worldviews. Observe the contrasts between the two: The Greek system was governed by a dualistic ontology with mind seen as good and matter viewed as evil; an epistemology of rationalism as it interacts continually with the world of

ideas or things; and an ethic originating from rationalistic harmony in nature.

The Christian proclamation, on the other hand, knew nothing of the kind. It rejected dualistic schema and affirmed the wholistic nature and essential goodness of God's creation. Its anthropology projected humanity as a unity, located evil not in the body but in the deliberate and willful choice that humankind made, and demarcated evil as an interlude in God's history. The Christian concept of reality is thus a theocentric one. The gospels also proclaimed an epistemology of revelation: God has spoken (Hebrews 1:1) and we have heard. Further, there was an affirmation of an ethic that was rooted in a divine given, expressible through relationships governed by love.

The special responsibility of the

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Christian is thus not only to claim uniqueness to Christ or to challenge the inadequacy of the human systems, but to construct a worldview that is uniquely Christian, in order to provide both a point of departure and a focus of convergence for human thought and action.

Seven Affirmations

Such a worldview must flow out of the basic faith commitment to the event and person of Jesus. With that faith commitment as the base, I would like to suggest seven basic affirmations that could constitute the contours of a Christian worldview.

1. God is the ultimate reality.

"In the beginning God . . ." (Genesis 1:1). There lies the Christian's point of departure for

any activity. Because God is, I am. Without him, nothing exists. In him we live, move and have our being (Acts 17:28). In the Christian perspective God is the center and reference point for all formulations. He is what constitutes reality. He is the cause and designer of all life, and his activities have structure, purpose and order. He is the apex.

The biblical perspective makes it clear that the God at the core of the Christian worldview is not a distant, impersonal, absolute force or idea or mind. He is a person. He lives.³ He speaks and has the closest possible relationships with humanity.⁴ He plans, therefore historic events are not simply disconnected accidents, for God has a hold on the movement of life in all its complexities.⁵ He cares. He watches over.⁶ He grieves over the course of sin in human life.⁷ He rejoices.⁸ He loves.⁹ He is angry.¹⁰ He judges.¹¹

If the personhood of God gives to the Christian worldview a warm, intimate experienceable relief, the creatorship of God provides a sense of reality that is both ultimate and infinite. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). "In the beginning was the Word. All things were made through him . . . To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God" (John 1:1, 2, 12).

The Genesis proclamation and John's prologue—the first introducing the creative purposes of God, and the second relating it to redemptive process in Christ—tell us that no worldview can satisfactorily answer the issues of life, unless it recognizes the Creator-Redeemer God. The creative activity of God not only declares that God is the cause and origin of all things, but that he is distinct from creation and at the same time related to it.

Another significant contribution of the doctrine of creation to the Christian worldview is an authentic understanding of ecology and

history. Because God is the Creator, the biblical revelation consistently maintains that in matter there is nothing intrinsically evil, and in nature there is nothing supernatural.

2. God has revealed himself to human beings.

To speak of God as a person and a creator is to acknowledge God's self-disclosure. The biblical data argues that the God who created the world by the "word of his mouth" has also chosen to reveal himself through the spoken word: "God spoke" (Hebrews 1:1). "All scripture is inspired by God" (2 Timothy 3:16).

The Christian worldview must accept the Bible not only as part of God's self-disclosure, but also as God's instrument to enrich and guide human beings in their pursuit of life. And so we have the admonitions. From Jesus: "Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me" (John 5:39 KJV). From John: "These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31). From Paul: The Word of God was given "for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16,17).

Seeing the Bible as God's word and revelation thus provides epistemological and ethical bases for the Christian worldview. The Bible is not a divine encyclopedia, but it does address life's great issues: Who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going? What is the meaning of history? What happens at death? How does God relate to me? How am I to relate to others, to the world at large? The Bible has something to say on these questions, and a Christian worldview must take these into account.

If nature and Scripture alike reveal God in majestic and sovereign terms, the most com-

plete and final disclosure of the divine occurs in the person of Jesus. The biblical worldview regards him as the ultimate revelation of God. He is "the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15). "He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature" (Hebrews 1:3). All the fullness of the Godhead dwells in him (Colossians 1:19; 2:9). Looking at him, we see the Father's glory (John 1:14). To see him is to see God (John 12:45). To honor him is to honor the Father (John 5:23). To receive him is to receive the Father (Luke 9:48). He reveals God's nature (John 1:18), speaks God's word (John 3:33), and manifests God's glory (2 Corinthians 4:6). There is thus both a certainty and a finality about the self-disclosure of God in Jesus.

3. God created human beings in his own image.

The biblical narrative asserts that humankind is neither a cosmic accident nor an evolutionary paradigm. Humanity is the direct result of God's will and purpose, and the crowning act of creation. The image of God motif so central to the Genesis account is the most powerful expression of dignity and uniqueness of humankind. Herein lies the answer to one of the basic worldview questions: Who am I? Where did I come from?

What constitutes the image of God has been the subject of theological debate throughout history, and numerous identifications have been made: human rationality, individuality, dominion, creativity, morality, personality, and so on.¹² Without being distracted by these distinctions and disputes, it is necessary to point out that the phrase "image of God" somehow places upon men and women a unique dignity and worth. They are matter, yet above matter; they are creatures, yet above other creatures; they bear the image of God, yet are not God; they are not only conscious, but conscious that they are conscious; they can stand at the center of existence and survey the past,

the present, and the future; history, action, and hope are part of their movements.

When the Christian worldview speaks of human beings made in the image of God, it gives notice to the world that it is not ready to accept any notion of the origin and nature of humanity except the one that recognizes men and women as children of God.

4. Sin has marred God's creation.

The Christian worldview must recognize not only the high level at which the biblical account places human beings at their creation, but also the low level to which humanity has sunk as a result of sin. The dignity as well as the depravity of humankind are part of biblical anthropology.

The problem of evil is critical to the construction of a Christian worldview. Pain and death stare at us from every side. Do they exist because of an irreconcilable dualism? The biblical answer is No. The Bible declares that sin is an interlude in God's order, consequent upon the creature's assertion to be independent of God's design and will. The assertion—not limited to the long ago—is in fact a quest on the part of the creature to make himself god.

Wherever self asserts to be what it cannot be, the domain of evil reigns. Such defiance against God's will cut humanity off from close and personal fellowship with God, leading to alienation. Alienation from God is at the root of distortion of perceptions, relationships, and values. As a result humanity stands in a chaotic, confused, and hopeless dilemma.

To say that human beings are sinful means that they have wilfully chosen to disobey God's expressed will, and deliberately rebelled against God. Consequently, the whole race is under the sway of sin. Isaiah paints a horrific picture of human depravity: "The whole head is sick, and the whole heart

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faint. From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it" (Isaiah 1:5-7). The meaning is clear: the whole person—physical, mental, spiritual, emotional—is sin-polluted, and with him the entire creation groans under the weight of evil (Romans 8:22).

Thus depraved humanity, an estranged fellowship, a groaning nature seem to bear witness to the insightful words of C. S. Lewis: "There is no neutral ground in the universe; every square inch, every split second, is claimed by God and counterclaimed by Satan."

5. God is engaged in a controversy with Satan.

The issue of the presence of the evil one is significant to the construction of a Christian worldview. From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible describes a continuing conflict between the powers of evil, headed by the devil, and the powers of good, controlled by God. The Bible never underestimates the existence and role of Satan in the affairs of human history. In fact it portrays his origin in his rebellion against God and the resultant casting out of heaven (Luke 10:18, Matthew 12:14), and his end in utter apocalyptic annihilation (Revelation 20:7-10).

Since then, history is dominated by a conflict of the kingdoms—the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of the evil one. This conflict provides the vantage point from which a Christian can look at questions of life, and draw at least two lessons. First, the central issue in this great controversy is the character of God: Can love and justice coexist in the nature of God? Are the expectations he holds for his creatures unfair, arbitrary, and impossible to fulfill?

The second lesson pertaining to the Christian worldview is the inevitable triumph toward which history is moving. This is why the cyclic concept of history, with its

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inherent meaninglessness, is alien to the biblical worldview. The Bible looks at history as linear, meaningful, purposive, and directional, inexorably moving toward its finale. From Creation to restoration teleology dominates history, testifying that God is the God of history; history is his work, his will, his revelation.

Viewed in this way, history's varied events—confusing and chaotic, evil prospering and righteous suffering, Nimrod and Hitler—will take on a new meaning. As the book of Revelation pictures, the goal of human history is to arrive at its teleological end: when the kingdoms of this world become the kingdom of our God, when God's will and sovereignty, justice, and love are universally acknowledged, and when the original purposes of God's creative order are ultimately established (Revelation 14:6,7).

6. God has taken the initiative to restore humanity through the redemptive activity of Christ.

The coming of Jesus constitutes not only the final form of God's self-disclosure, but also God's way of dealing with the problem of sin and conflict between the kingdoms. The incarnation is thus the ground on which a Christian worldview can speak about the reality and meaning of life.

Christ provides both form and vitality to all existence. History finds its commentary, continuation, and culmination in him. He acts as the arbiter of human living. He is at once human, at once God, thereby both transcendent and immanent, above history and yet relevant to history. He is one among men and the Redeemer of all.

Jesus is the man of the cross and

the Lord of the resurrection, both the defier of death and the definer of life. In the act of that defiance and in the proclamation of that definition, Jesus exposed to the universe the true nature of evil—an interlude, an act of willful choice against God's reality, finally crushed by God's Son on a cruel cross—and the true meaning of life, born out of that cross and confirmed by an empty tomb.

By the act of crucifixion and resurrection, God not only reconciled the world unto himself (2 Corinthians 5:19) and redeemed humanity from the curse of sin (Galatians 4:4-6), but also vanquished the devil in the great controversy. The triumphant conquest of the devil, and his ultimate doom are prominent themes in the New Testament (John 12:31-33; 14:30; Colossians 2:15; Hebrews 2:14, 15; Revelation 12:10, 11), and are essential to an understanding of the teleological and redemptive nature of the Christian worldview.

7. God has guaranteed and will bring about ultimate restoration.

The Christian worldview looks at the present as an interim, and does not see it as lacking hope or destiny. The consummative focus of biblical history is the Parousia. It is the man Christ Jesus who will confront the present age and all that it represents. The One who brought the good news of grace will stand at the last days as the pronouncer of judgment on a fallen and rebellious order. The climactic moment in the history between good and evil will witness the unleashing of divine wrath against every expression of hostility towards God. The judgmental purge is described in terms of fire that will melt the elements and purify the earth (2 Peter 3:10-13).

Out of this apocalyptic purging will come forth the fulfillment of God's promise: "Behold I create new heavens and a new earth" (Isaiah 65:17). The emerging cosmos is not a creation ex nihilo, but a cosmos in harmony with God's eternal purposes, prepared to be the home of the redeemed,

without any sign or evidence of the marred history of man.

The hope of that kind of restoration gives the Christian worldview both direction and purpose. The anticipation commands the Christian to look beyond the present, to press for optimism in the midst of despair, to never give up when answers are not readily available, and to cherish the hope that the doors of learning will never close.

Conclusion

Worldview is a construct—a perspectival construct about the make-up of life as it struggles with the questions of reality, truth, ethics, and history; a confessional construct that provides a point of departure, a sense of direction, a locus of destination, and a strategy of unity; as well as purposive construct that meets the basic needs of human life and action.

Given that definition, in order to find meaning for existence and destiny, Christians must be certain of their worldview. They need to have not only a theocentric certitude but also a faith-commitment to the worldview. Such a commitment need not be a source of either embarrassment or apology. All people work on that basis, and it is essential for Christians to find their anchor in the surety of their faith commitment to Christ, in whom is revealed the basis for the biblical worldview.

Such a worldview must begin with the reality of God, who stands sovereign over his creation and at the same time relates to his creatures. Yet all is not well with this world: the problem of sin and the presence of the evil one seriously challenge the character of God, the nature of his kingdom, and the existence of humankind. A conflict is raging between good and evil in human person and history, and God has chosen to expose the nature of this conflict, deal with the issues of the controversy, provide humanity a redemptive possibility, and direct history toward the in-

evitable triumph leading to the restoration of his creative purposes. The method God has chosen to accomplish this purpose is Christ. God in Christ thus becomes the central point of reference for the Christian worldview.

NOTES

1. Brian Walsh and Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), p. 35.

2. All quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are from the Revised Standard Version.

3. Deuteronomy 5:26; Joshua 3:10; Isaiah 37:4; Jeremiah 10:10; Matthew 16:16; Romans 9:26; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Revelation 7:2.

4. Genesis 2:16; 17:1-3; Exodus 29:42; 33:9-11; Deuteronomy 5:4, 24, 27; Psalm 85:8; Isaiah 52:6; Hebrews 12:25.

5. Genesis 50:20; Job 1:12; Psalm 40:17; Proverbs 16:9; Isaiah 46:11; Jeremiah 26:3; Romans 8:28; 2 Timothy 1:9; 1 John 3:8.

6. Matthew 6:26, 28-30; 1 Peter 5:7; Exodus 22:21-27; 23:9; 1 Kings 19:5-7.

7. Genesis 6:6; Psalm 95:10; 1 Corinthians 10:5.

8. Psalm 69:30, 31; Proverbs 16:7; Hebrews 11:5; 1 Kings 3:10; 1 Thessalonians 4:1; 2 Timothy 2:4.

9. 1 John 3:16; 4:16; Psalm 91:14; Exodus 34:6, 7; Jeremiah 32:18; Isaiah 63:7.

10. Psalm 7:11; 79:5; 80:4; 85:5.

11. Genesis 18:25; Psalm 50:6; 75:7; Acts 10:42; Romans 2:16; 3:6.

12. See Owen L. Hughes, "A Christian View of Human Personality", *Dialogue*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (1989), pp. 12-14, 29.

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Reason to Believe

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McDowell; *The Day Death Died*, by Michael Green; and *Who Moved the Stone?*, by Frank Morrison.

The claims of biblical Christianity and the evidences of the divinity of Jesus have withstood the scrutiny of intelligent people through the centuries. We do not need to abandon rationality in order to accept them. There is, indeed, a reason to believe.

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Useful Books

Those wishing to have at hand good material on sharing their faith and answering questions about Christian beliefs will find these books helpful:

- Cornell, Edward John. *An Introduction to Christian Apologetics*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984.
- Craig, William Lane. *Apologetics*. Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1984.
- Green, Michael. *Was Jesus Who He Said He Was?* Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987.
- Green, Michael. *The Day Death Died*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- Küng, Hans. *Does God Exist?* New York: Vintage Books, 1981.
- McDowell, Josh. *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*. San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life Publishers, 1979.
- McDowell, Josh. *The Resurrection Factor*. San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life Publishers, 1981.
- Morrison, Frank. *Who Moved the Stone?* Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976.
- Schaeffer, Francis. *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1972.
- Sire, James W. *The Universe Next Door*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988.