

## The Importance of Deliberate Worldview Training

I love soul winning. Door-to-door evangelism is one of my favorite parts of ministry. I enjoy meeting and interacting with new people. It's exhilarating to watch the "lights come on" as truth penetrates the heart. Of course, there is almost nothing as exciting as seeing someone, under conviction, bow their head in a garage or on a porch swing to accept Christ as their Savior. More and more often, however, I'm finding that people are not *capable* of embracing Christianity within the span of a single visit – even if that visit lasts for hours. The challenge to their worldview is too disorienting.<sup>1</sup> The gulf between theirs and mine is just too vast to be spanned all at once. In fact, I've noticed that it's no longer safe to ask my favorite question for starting the spiritual conversation. I prefer to begin like so, "If we were to fast-forward to the end of life, and you were standing in Heaven before God, and He asked, 'why should I let you in,' how would you respond?" Obviously, there is nothing untoward about the question itself. It is thought-provoking yet inoffensive. The problem is that it *assumes* a belief in God and in the reality of Heaven. Tragically, this is no longer true for many people, and thus the scenario is implausible – almost beyond the realm of possibility. This problem raises the issue of *plausibility structures*. You have likely never heard the term before, but everybody has one, and hence the concept should be easy to comprehend. "Everything that we believe is filtered through our plausibility structures," explains Joe Carter. They're a deeply embedded set of assumptions that function "as a gatekeeper, letting in evidence that is matched against what we already consider to be possible. Plausibility structures filter out claims that we believe cannot be reasonable or potentially true. They don't necessarily tell us if a claim *is* true, only that ... the claim appears plausible enough for us to accept and that we are not wholly unwarranted in thinking it *could* be true... For example, if I were to find a box of cookies in my kitchen cabinet, I would assume that my wife had bought them at the store and placed them there herself. If someone were to argue that tree-dwelling elves baked the cookies, packaged them for their corporate employer, and stashed them in my pantry, I would have a difficult time believing their claim; the existence of unionized tree-dwelling elves is simply not a part of my plausibility structure."<sup>2</sup> This is the same basic problem I've noticed in my evangelism – many of the people to whom I speak no longer share my basic presuppositions, my worldview. I, therefore, have to confront *that* problem before or at least as part of my presentation of the gospel and other biblical truth. No matter how skillful or eloquent my witness may be, a bridge between worldviews must exist first. I experienced a rather stark example of this problem while listening to a sermon directed toward our teens. A wonderful brother was preaching from Proverbs, touching on various current issues as he went. Somehow the subject of homosexuality and transgenderism came up about which he exclaimed, "Come on young people – it's time to grow up. It's time to drop the silly nonsense and get with the program." In his mind, it was simply a matter of common sense. In his view the idea of switching genders is self-evidently absurd – there's no such thing as being transgender. But that's only self-evident to someone with his worldview. It struck me, however, just how few of the teens listening to him actually shared that worldview. Separated by at least forty years, coming from mainly broken homes, educated in the public schools, steeped in social media, and saturated with the tropes of Hollywood, it is likely they shared few if any of his basic assumptions about life, truth, and especially sexual matters. As he spoke, one could literally see their minds close and disengage. His comment assumed that they were in rebellion against what they knew to be right. At a certain level, that's, of course, true (Rom. 1:18-20). But at another level, it's important to recognize that they weren't rejecting the Bible *per se*. The Bible never made it past the "bouncer" of their plausibility structure. The notion that their own or their friend's struggle with transgenderism was made up or only a silly symptom of spiritual immaturity struck them as ludicrous. They had been trained to think of it as a real condition that must be treated with respect. As such the preacher's perspective was simply not a live option for them. The point is, to go on offense and reach a culture with which we share almost nothing in common, we must be prepared to attack and defeat its worldview. Only then will we be able to make it past their mental gatekeeper.

Obviously, there is a flip side to this as well. Pastors and parents know only too well that university professors often "rejoice in challenging and ultimately shattering the Christian worldview of incoming freshmen."<sup>3</sup> Hence a deliberate strategy is needed for guarding the heart and defending the mind against the assault on the biblical worldview. Such a plan exists; unfortunately, it is seldom followed. In the 1950s a Yale University professor named William McGuire developed a theory about the process people go through before embracing an idea. He postulated that ideas operate like viruses, spreading from person-to-person. Naturally, because of our sinful nature, we tend to get infected with bad ideas more easily than we do with good ones. This fact raises the need to develop immunity to dangerous unbiblical worldview viruses. In the body, immunity can be acquired through a process known as *inoculation*. Inoculation introduces a pathogen (typically in a weakened form) into a living organism to stimulate the production of antibodies.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, McGuire devised an experiment to replicate this process. After dividing participants into six test groups, he proceeded to challenge the idea that "people should brush their teeth every day" with the contrary claim that "brushing your teeth is bad for you." Each test group was prepared for this attack on their belief with a different type/level of defense. (1) The first group received *no preparation*. They were simply presented with an opposing viewpoint: "Here's an argument against brushing your teeth — see what you think." (2) The second group's preparation was merely to *reinforce* what they already held to be true. No argument *for* brushing your teeth was given; they just repeated the conventional wisdom. "You know that brushing your teeth is good, right?" (3) The third group was given *warning* that their view would be attacked. "Be careful, you're about to be exposed to a persuasive argument that brushing your teeth is bad." (4) The fourth group was given something very similar to viral *inoculation*. They were told what the

<sup>1</sup> A worldview may be defined as "the conceptual lens through which we see, understand, and interpret the world and our place within it." Cf. Tawa J. Anderson, *An Introduction to Christian Worldview : Pursuing God's Perspective in a Pluralistic World* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2017), 12.

<sup>2</sup> Joe Carter, "Apologetics and the Role of Plausibility Structures," *The Gospel Coalition*, last updated July 18, 2014, accessed November 29, 2018, [www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/apologetics-and-the-role-of-plausibility-structures/](http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/apologetics-and-the-role-of-plausibility-structures/)

<sup>3</sup> Anderson, *An Introduction to Christian Worldview : Pursuing God's Perspective in a Pluralistic World*, 47.

<sup>4</sup> "Inoculation," Merriam Webster, accessed November 30, 2018, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/inoculation](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/inoculation)

persuasive argument would be. “You will hear an argument stating a brushing your teeth wipes away saliva, which is the tooth’s natural protective agent.” (5) The preparation of the fifth group went one step further. Here they were told the argument ahead of time (i.e., inoculation) and then that argument was *refuted*. “When you hear the argument that brushing your teeth is bad because it wipes away saliva, keep in mind that saliva alone cannot dislodge prepared foods from the teeth — only a brush can consistently do that.” (6) The final group received inoculation, refutation, and preparation. That is, after stating the argument and knocking it down they continued: “You now know one argument you’ll hear to persuade you that brushing your teeth is bad, but you’ll be presented with several arguments, and it will be up to you to think them through and refute them.” Clearly, the sixth type of preparation was most effective. The fascinating discovery, however, was that the first type was not the least effective. Instead, *reinforcement* was actually a less successful defense than no preparation at all. Incredible! Participants who held true beliefs were persuaded to embrace lies because of how they had been convinced to hold their true belief in the first place. The implications are obvious. We must be deliberate about inoculating our kids against unbiblical worldviews. Merely repeating a message over and over again (even if it’s true) is actually counterproductive, worse than no preparation at all.<sup>5</sup> To prevent worldly indoctrination, they must be taught to recognize unbiblical worldviews, be shown how to refute their errors, and be equipped through sound biblical teaching to think through new challenges critically. To that task, I shall turn in the next issue.

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<sup>5</sup> Jeff Myers and David A. Noebel, *Understanding the Times : A Survey of Competing Worldviews* (Manitou Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2015), 10-11.