WHY COLLEGE MATTERS TO GOD

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ONE of my favorite Far Side comics by Gary Larsen depicts a herd of cows grazing on a hillside. Suddenly one of the cows raises her head and exclaims, "Hey, wait a minute! This is grass! We've been eating grass!" Like most Far Sides, the comic works because it uses animals to depict a universal truth: In society we often do things automatically without ever asking the question "Why?"

Take college, for example. A Tibetan herdsman visiting America would notice a strange phenomenon. Among the middle and upper classes of society, young people around the age of eighteen complete a certain level of schooling known as "high school." Then millions of them pack up their belongings and move to a centralized campus to live with other young people, most of whom they have never met. For the next four or five years, they complete a rather odd assortment of classes that collectively comprise what is called "undergraduate education."

Just what are these classes? First, they take "general education" or "core curriculum"—classes such as English literature, history, natural and social sciences, and philosophy—the kind of stuff that people have been studying for centuries, and which enables college graduates to sound sophisticated at parties. Along with the core, students
take classes in what they call a "major" area of study: A subject that they are most interested in, or one that they (or their parents) think will yield the best career prospects. Amid all of this coursework, the students find ample time for eating, socializing, competing in athletics, and playing Guitar Hero in the dormitory.

It all may seem quite normal to those of us who have gone through or are going through the process. But our Tibetan herdsman probably would be hard pressed to see the purpose in all of it. His perplexity would increase if he visited a private Christian college, where chances are students pay more money for a narrower range of academic programs and more restrictions on their social lives.

Of course, there are a variety of reasons why students choose to attend a Christian college. For many of them, it's the perception of a safe environment. For others, it's a particular major that the school offers; or perhaps the Christian emphasis in the dormitories, chapel, and student organizations; or the school's reputation for academic rigor and personal attention from Christian professors. It may even be the likelihood of finding a Christian spouse at a religious college.

None of these features, however, is unique to a Christian college. For example, if it's safety you're looking for, you could just as well attend a secular college in New Hampshire, which boasts the nation's lowest crime rate (but has few Christian colleges). Moreover, most public universities have thriving Christian organizations on campus that provide the opportunity for fellowship and ministry—and more non-Christians to evangelize as well. One can also find good Christian professors at just about any secular university. One of the most outspoken evangelical professors that I had as a college student was my astronomy professor at the University of Michigan.

The real uniqueness of a Christian college lies elsewhere. Simply stated, the difference between a Christian university and other institutions of higher education is this: A Christian college weaves a Christian worldview into the entire fabric of the institution, including academic life. It is designed to help you see and live every part of your life purposefully as a follower of Christ. Such a statement will take a while to unpack in all of its complexity; and that is the purpose of this book. If properly understood, however, this concept will enable you to thrive at a Christian college and to understand the purpose of each class you take, from English literature to organic chemistry. But first we must establish four foundational concepts, the first of which is the notion of worldview.

1. What Is a Worldview?

The 1999 film *The Matrix* has been a favorite among youth pastors and those who like using movies to discuss deep ideas. That's because amid the fight scenes and big explosions, *The Matrix* forces us to ponder the age-old philosophical question posed by Rene Descartes back in the 1600s: How can I know what is really
real? The film begins with the protagonist, Neo, as a normal New York City resident. But gradually he becomes enlightened to the true state of reality—that computers have taken over the world and are using humans as power supplies, all the while downloading sensory perceptions into their minds to make them think they are living normal modern lives. Neo achieves “salvation” when he accurately perceives the bad guys not as real people but as merely computer-generated programs.

*The Matrix* thus challenges us to recognize that some of our foundational assumptions about reality—that other people exist, that this laptop I’m writing on is really here—are just that: assumptions that serve as starting points for how we perceive our world. If my friend chooses to believe that I am a computer program designed to deceive him, it’s unlikely that I will be able to produce evidence that will convince him otherwise. Furthermore, as Neo’s experience in the film indicates, shifting from one perception of reality to another can be a rather jarring, painful process.

In other words, *The Matrix* illustrates the notion of “worldview”—that our prior assumptions about reality shape how we perceive the world around us. A worldview can be defined as a set of assumptions about the basic makeup of the world. As one scholar has stated, it is a view of the world that governs our behavior in the world. A worldview is revealed in how we answer basic questions of life such as, Who am I? Does God exist? Is there a purpose to the universe? Are moral values absolute or relative? What is reality?

We can think of a worldview as a pair of glasses through which we view our world. We do not so much focus on the lenses; in fact, we often forget they are even there. Rather, we look through the lenses to view the rest of the world. Or here’s another metaphor: If you have ever done a jigsaw puzzle, you know that the picture on the puzzle box is important. It helps you know where a particular piece fits into the overall puzzle. A worldview does the same. It’s the picture on the puzzle box of our lives, helping us to make sense of the thousands of experiences that bombard us every day.

We cannot help but have a worldview; like the pair of spectacles perched on my nose, my worldview exists and is constantly interpreting reality for me, whether I notice it or not. Neo begins *The Matrix* with a worldview; it just happens to be an incorrect one, and he has never bothered to think critically about what his worldview is. One of the main purposes of college, therefore, is to challenge students to examine their worldviews. Which brings me to the second foundational concept.

2. All Education Comes With a Worldview.

Worldviews shape not just our individual lives but universities as well. There was a time when scholars claimed that education was completely objective. Professors in the secular academy, it was believed, simply “studied the facts” and communicated those facts to their students. Now we know better. All education, whether religious or secular, comes with a built-in point of view. Even in academic disciplines, the worldview of the scholar shapes how the
data is interpreted, and even what data is selected in the first place. Nothing illustrates this fact better than the following optical illusion commonly used in psychology:

Some viewers immediately see an old lady when they look at this drawing. Others see a young woman. Eventually, just about anyone will be able to see both (if you cannot, relax and keep looking!). This is because while the actual black and white lines on the page (the “facts,” so to speak) do not change, our minds arrange and interpret these lines in different ways to create a coherent whole. Moreover, this is not something that we consciously decide to do; our minds are programmed in such a way as to do this automatically. We cannot avoid doing so. Neither can those who visualize the drawing in different ways simply argue rationally about whose interpretation is the correct one, since their disagreement is not so much over the facts of the drawing but over what those “facts” mean.

In a more complex way, the same process occurs whenever scholars work in their disciplines. Historians, for example, agree on certain events of the American Revolution—that on April 18, 1775, Paul Revere rode through the New England countryside shouting “The British are coming!”; that the Continental Congress signed the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776; that on December 25, 1776, George Washington and his army crossed the Delaware River and surprised Hessian soldiers at Trenton. But what do these facts mean? How are they to be arranged into a coherent whole? When did the American Revolution actually begin? Was it motivated primarily by religious impulses or by Enlightenment philosophy?

Historians argue endlessly over such questions, and the answers to them depend in part on the worldview of the historian, who selects and interprets historical data according to certain assumptions about how politics and societies change—ultimately, basic assumptions about what makes humans tick. Thus, a Marxist historian who believes that ultimately human beings are economic creatures motivated by material rewards may interpret the American Revolution in a way that emphasizes the financial interests of colonial elites. The Christian who believes that human motivation often runs deeper than just economic interests will likely emphasize other factors such as ideas and religious impulses. The “facts” of the Revolution are the same for each historian, but like Neo’s perception of his world, the interpretation of those facts is shaped by the scholar’s worldview.

Or, to cite an example from science: Biologists generally agree about the makeup of the cell, the structure of DNA, and even the
commonality of DNA between humans and other life forms. But do such facts "demonstrate" that human beings evolved from other life forms, or do they indicate that some sort of intelligent being used common material to create humans and other life forms? The answer to this question is not simply a matter of evidence; it is influenced by the scientist's assumptions about ultimate reality.

More generally, not just academic disciplines but entire universities operate according to worldviews. One of the universities that I attended, the University of Michigan, had a worldview; it was just never stated as such. In fact, one could argue that like most secular universities, my alma mater suffered from worldview schizophrenia. In the classroom, most of my courses were taught from a worldview perspective known as scientific materialism: the material universe is all that exists; human beings are a complex life form that evolved randomly over the course of millions of years; belief in God is a trait that evolved relatively recently as a way for humans to explain their origins, but now this belief is no longer necessary. Thus, academic inquiry is best conducted when one sets aside any prior faith commitments.

Student life at Michigan, however, typically embodied a different worldview—that of modern hedonism, or devotion to pleasure. It could be stated as such: In the absence of any higher purpose to life, personal pleasure and success are the greatest values. You should get good grades in college since that is your ticket to a successful career. However, you should not let studies interfere with having a good time, generally defined in terms of parties, dating, and of course, college football.

Paradoxically, however, a third worldview governed much of campus culture, one best described by the paradoxical phrase tolerant moralism. According to this worldview, intolerance and abuse of the environment are the great evils of modern society; diversity and ecological responsibility are the ultimate goods. The actions of individuals and the university community, therefore, are rigorously scrutinized according to how they measure up to these moral values, and anyone from the custodian to the president is liable to censure if their words or actions are seen as detrimental to these causes. Recently, for example, the president of Harvard University lost his job because of remarks he made that were deemed critical of women's scientific capabilities.

3. The Christian College: A Unified Worldview

From a Christian perspective, one could argue that each of these worldviews contains at least a grain of truth (though we'll wait until chapter three to make that argument). The problem, however, is that the secular university makes no attempt to articulate an overarching philosophy that gives a coherent purpose to all of its parts. As a former college president has remarked, the modern university is not a uni-versity at all but rather a "multi-versity."

A Christian university, by contrast, seeks to provide an overarching framework that gives a sense of purpose and unity for
everything from English Literature to chapel to intramural soccer. That umbrella, of course, is a Christian worldview. The particular elements will be explained in greater detail in the chapters that follow. But briefly, the Christian worldview, as described in the Bible, can be thought of as a grand drama in three acts:

Act 1: Creation. The universe didn’t evolve by chance. Rather, an all-knowing, all-powerful Triune God created everything that exists. Moreover, God called his creation good and delighted in it just as my ten-year-old daughter delights in constructing animals from clay. God culminated his creative work by making human beings in his own image and giving them the capacity to delight in creation with him and act as sub-creators in their own right.

Act 2: Fall. Human beings, created with a free will, used that freedom to disobey God. Their sin corrupted every part of God’s good creation, from human relationships to rivers that overflow their banks and wipe out villages.

Act 3: Redemption. God, however, immediately set about redeeming his fallen creation and restoring it to its original goodness. The key player in the redemptive drama is Jesus Christ, who came to earth to take the cosmic penalty for sin upon himself. Eventually history will culminate in the re-establishment of God’s reign throughout the entire universe. In the meantime, the followers of Jesus carry on God’s redemptive activity in all of creation.

That’s the biblical narrative in a nutshell, and it has tremendous implications for a Christian college. Plants thrive when they are exposed to a healthy combination of sunlight and rain. Similarly, we can think of “creation” and “redemption” as complementary purposes that give life to virtually every aspect of a Christian college. For example, we don’t just have a college basketball team to boost school spirit or attract attention, as secular colleges do. Rather, basketball has both a creative and a redemptive purpose for us. The biblical creation story tells us that God delights in his creation, and he created human beings in his image to delight in creation as well. Thus, play honors God; and developing our ability to shoot a basketball—or spike a volleyball, or swing a golf club—is a way to more fully express God’s image.

College sports, however, also bear the marks of the fall. Athletes are placed on pedestals, coaches sometimes cheat, and heated contests can degenerate into hatred toward referees and opposing players. A Christian college, therefore, also plays basketball in order to “redeem” this particular corner of God’s creation by fielding teams that demonstrate sportsmanship and fans who display Christian charity to opponents and referees (that’s the ideal, at least).

The Christian story provides us with a sense of purpose in the classroom as well as on the court. This concept will be explored in detail in subsequent chapters, but for now let me illustrate with an example from a common major, Business. One thing that we learn in the book of Genesis is that God intended for humans to live in community. That’s why he created Adam and Eve. He also designed his creation to increase in complexity and interdependence. Today we see that complexity in virtually every aspect of life. Take, for example, my morning cup of coffee, which would be impossible if I were left to my own resources. The beans for my coffee are grown
and harvested on a hillside in Colombia. They are packaged in a plant and transported to my local grocery store by ships and trucks, where I purchase a pound of them for a few dollars. The parts for my coffee maker are produced in various factories, and the electricity that makes it work is generated by a coal-burning plant five miles north of my house. Simply put, my cup of coffee represents the tip of an iceberg of complex, far-reaching human interactions. And that's a good thing; it's how the world was intended to function.

In its most basic sense, the academic discipline of Business is about learning how to develop our ability to carry on the thousands of economic and social transactions that we depend on each day; in other words, it's about developing our capacity to live out the notion of human community that was part of God's original design for his creation.

The study of Business, however, also has a redemptive component. Unfortunately, economic relations are corrupted by all sorts of individual and structural sin. We see this in the news with corporate scandals. But it also exists under the radar in economic injustices that might be unwittingly perpetuated even by the trading of the coffee beans that I purchase. How do individual Christians behave ethically in businesses where cutting corners is considered the norm? How does one set up a business that pays coffee growers in Colombia a fair price for their beans and still turns a profit in the U.S.? How does one responsibly generate wealth and opportunity to enable others to benefit from good-paying jobs? These are the sorts of questions that courses in Business need to deal with at a Christian college. In other words, Christians don't just study Business in order to make money; they explore how best to express human interdependence and to redeem economic relations that have been thrown out of whack by the fall.

In sum, each course that you take at a Christian college—and everything else you do, for that matter—has a purpose and value within a Christian worldview framework. Figuring out what that purpose is, however, isn't simple, since as the final section explains, worldviews don't stay the same.


Worldviews are constantly subject to correction and revision as we encounter new people, ideas and experiences. In other words, they are dynamic, not static. Thus, the purpose of a Christian college isn't simply to hand you a complete Christian worldview on a platter; rather, it's to start you on the process of developing a comprehensive, coherent, yet dynamic Christian worldview. This does not mean that we hold Christianity as a tentative hypothesis that we're willing to abandon if some new idea comes along. But it does mean that we hold many of our beliefs loosely and are open to adjusting our Christian worldview as we encounter new ideas and experiences in college.
Let me illustrate it this way: I love crossword puzzles. Back in high school, they got me through more than a few dull classes (and probably lowered my GPA as well). More importantly, crossword puzzles help us understand how knowledge and beliefs actually work. The correct answer to a particular crossword clue is often uncertain. Its "truth" must be supported by other clues in the puzzle. The key to solving a crossword puzzle is to build a network of interlocking answers that confirm each other and form a coherent whole. A completed crossword puzzle in which all of the interlocking answers confirm and support each other, therefore, is constructed painstakingly through a process of trial and error. Moreover, the truth of a particular answer is rarely absolute but merely relative to the other answers in the puzzle. Here's a simple example:

**Across**
1. A freshwater fish

**Down**
2. The top of an arc

If these were the only questions that you had to answer, the solutions might seem simple: "Bass" and "Apex" seem to fit nicely. But let's add two more clues:

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1  C  A  R  3
2    P
3  P  E  E  R
2  X  K
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"Look intently" seems to work fine. But after trying and failing to think of "meat from a pig" that begins with an "S," you would probably conclude that "PORK" is the only possible answer to 3 Down. But what about "BASS"? You need to go back and erase the word, change it to "CARP," and the puzzle is solved. How do you know your solution is "true"? Because all of the tentative answers fit together.

So what does this have to do with a Christian worldview? Plenty. We can think of our assorted beliefs as answers to particular clues, and a worldview as the entire crossword puzzle formed by these interlocking, mutually-supporting beliefs. Experienced puzzlers use pencil, not pen, to do crosswords since they know that successfully solving the puzzle inevitably involves going back and erasing earlier
answers in light of later information. Of course, some answers are so clearly correct that they can be written in pen. If I get this clue, for example: "Former Chicago Bulls great Michael" (six letters), I can confidently write "JORDAN" in permanent ink. The key is to recognize what answers are certain and which ones are not.

Obviously, some components of our Christian worldview can be written in pen. For example, if we have a five letter box and the clue is "God's written word," we can safely write "BIBLE" in pen. However, Christians tend to use too much pen when formulating their worldview. For example, Christians in the Middle Ages generally believed that the earth was the center of the universe around which the sun and planets revolved. When Galileo proposed otherwise, he was placed under house arrest. Why? Because the church interpreted verses such as Psalm 104:5 ("He set the earth on its foundations; it can never be moved.") to teach that the earth is fixed at the center of the universe, and the sun and planets revolve around it. Today, of course, we see such an interpretation as a result of mistaken medieval cosmology, not a necessary "fact" of scripture. Medieval Christians, however, had penned in as an absolute truth the notion that the earth is at the center of creation when they should have used pencil.

Students often arrive at college with much of their worldview written in pen. In fact, many of us come from churches, schools, or families that encourage us to fill in the puzzle with as much pen as possible. To develop a mature Christian worldview, however, you will need to be willing to use more pencil. In fact, one of the purposes of a Christian education is to help you distinguish which parts of your worldview are open to revision and which parts are not.

The crossword puzzle analogy also helps explain why a Christian college emphasizes the notion of a learning community. I am seldom able to complete an entire crossword puzzle on my own. A few weeks ago, for example, I was stuck. The four-letter clue was "Orpheus's instrument" and knowing from previous clues that the first letter was "L" and the last letter was "E," I had penciled in "LYRE." Unfortunately, the rest of the puzzle didn't fit. Eventually I gave up and handed the puzzle to my wife, a professional musician, who quickly changed "LYRE" to "LUTE." After that, the rest of the puzzle fell neatly into place. Similarly, at a Christian college, we depend on others to help us revise our worldview. That's why we call ourselves a learning community. Not only your professors but fellow students bring different perspectives and areas of expertise that can help you adjust and refine your own worldview.

Of course, all analogies are imperfect, and the crossword puzzle metaphor falls short in one significant way: When I complete a crossword puzzle, I read it up and throw it away. A worldview, however, is never fully complete. One doesn't spend four years of college constructing a worldview, then place it on the shelf and walk away. A Christian worldview helps us make sense of our lives and gives a sense of purpose to everything that we do, both individually and collectively. But just as Galileo's discoveries necessitated a change to the medieval worldview, so new insights and experiences require that we re-examine and adjust our Christian worldview throughout our lives. In other words, the pencil is a permanent part of the mature Christian's toolkit, and the college years are a good time to learn to use it.

The cow in Gary Larson's comic was right to raise her head and ask why she was eating grass. But the fact is, grass is good for cows,
and as far as I can tell they seem to like it. In fact, it's essential to their survival. So too, Christian college students should ask why they're investing significant time and effort in higher education; and they should ask the "why" question of every course that they take. Why does college matter to God? The answer to that question lies in the notion of a Christian worldview. This book will unpack and explain that notion more fully—but we'll begin with a brief look at where the notion of a Christian college came from in the first place.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What worldviews have you experienced so far in your educational background?

2. What would be an example in your own field of study where the worldview of the scholar affects the conclusions that are reached?

3. Which beliefs that you brought with you to college are written in "pen"? Which ones are written in "pencil"?

4. How should one determine which beliefs are open to revision and which ones are not?