

WORLDLY WINDS

WINDS OF DOCTRINE 2



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A REVISION STUDY FROM
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

Worldly Winds: Winds of Doctrine 2
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The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Worldly Winds

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Worldly Winds

Welcome to *Worldly Winds*

The sails of our soul – our thoughts, desires, and values – are continuously assailed by contrary winds, seeking to blow us off course in our journey with the Lord.

Many of these ill winds derive from worldly thinking and ways. They blow at us from a wide variety of sources, and they are often very subtle, and not easy to recognize.

But we must not allow these worldly winds to fill the sails of our soul. We must be careful to recognize them and to keep our sails free from their influence. In this part of our study of *Winds of Doctrine* we'll look at seven worldly winds that we must be careful to steer clear of in our journey with the Lord.

ReVision studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 Humanism

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world. 1 John 4.1-3

Disruptive winds

Believers in Jesus Christ want the sails of their soul to fill with the sweet, constant, and true winds of God's Holy Spirit. The Wind of God directs us day by day into greater depths of mercy, grace, truth, goodness, and abundant life in Jesus. We focus our minds to catch His breezes, deploy our hearts to eagerly desire Him, and set the compass of conscience to value His Kingdom and righteousness above all else. We look to Jesus, exalted in glory, delighting in His Word, praising and thanking Him in all things, and doing all things as unto Him, the North Star of our journey of faith.

But as we have seen, the Wind of God is not the only wind vying to reach and fill our sails. In this world, wherever we go, certain strong winds of doctrine swirl in strength around us, emanating from a wide range of pressure cells in the media, pop culture, the universities and schools, the halls of government, and many other sources. These worldly winds of doctrine blow across the steady Wind of God, and they can disrupt our progress and cause us to lose focus and drift; and, undiscerned and unchecked, they can shipwreck our progress in the Lord, if only for a season.

Primary among these worldly winds is the wind of humanism. Humanism, wrote Leon Wieseltier is both “a pedagogy and a worldview” (“Among the Disrupted,” *The New York Times*, January 7, 2015). That is, humanism offers an expansive curriculum of works and inculcates a worldview which says, in essence, that human beings are the measure of all things. All understanding of truth, goodness, or beauty can be determined only by human beings exercising disciplined, rational thought.

There is much of beauty, goodness, and truth to be discovered in the worldview of humanism, as Paul showed us in his address on Mars Hill. But many dangers also exist in the gusts that accompany this wind of doctrine.

Humanism defined

The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers this succinct definition of humanism: “a rationalist outlook or system of thought attaching prime importance to human rather than divine or supernatural matters.” It further clarifies humanism as “a system of thought criticized as being centred on the notion of the rational, autonomous self and ignoring the conditioned nature of the individual.”

Leon Wieseltier argued that humanism provides the best way to understand the world and make our way in it, so we ought to resist every attempt to reduce its importance. The great danger facing humanism today, Mr. Wieseltier argued, comes not from religion, but from science, which reduces the uniqueness of the human being by making humans subject to impersonal and irresistible laws of physics (“conditioned nature”), and seeing in humanism something less than a “hard science” approach to truth. He explained, “There is nothing soft about the quest for a significant life...In a society rife with theories and practices that flatten and shrink and chill the human subject, the humanist is the dissenter.” What Mr. Wieseltier fears is a case of the child eating the parent, because science itself is a product of the humanism which is everywhere present in our world.

Forms of humanism have been in the air since the ancient Greeks began reflecting on the world. But humanism's great leap into worldwide significance came, first, with the Renaissance – the rediscovery by

Europeans of ancient Greek and Latin literature and art – and then, in the 18th century, with the *Encyclopedia* project of such French *philosophes* as Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond D’Alembert.

Humanism makes the rational mind the final arbiter of all truth. If you can’t explain something by logic and reason, then whatever you are explaining either does not exist or is not relevant. Humanism accepts a place for religion, but only as a subcategory of philosophy; and it demands that all religion must make sense and be explainable within parameters established by human experience and careful thought. Immanuel Kant, one of the foremost humanist thinkers of the modern period, captured the essence of humanism and its relationship to religion in his book entitled, *Religion with the Bounds of Reason Alone*. Religion has a place, as long as it acknowledges that it must serve the tenets of reason.

Problems with humanism

And this introduces what is undoubtedly the chief problem with humanism: It puts no stock in normative divine revelation. Humanism is happy for religion to have a place in the world, but only so long as whatever religion believes is within the bounds of logical thought. I recall once asking a well-known theologian about his view of the resurrection of Jesus; he explained, “Dead people don’t rise.” For him, and for many who consider themselves Christians today, the resurrection of Jesus is something that happens only in our minds, or our hearts, and has a comforting and motivating effect on us. To such people it is not reasonable to believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus – or the divine inspiration of the Bible, or the incarnation of God, or heaven as a true spiritual place, or conversion as anything other than a psychological event.

Translated into the evangelical world, humanist thinking can lead one to conclude that we only need to take seriously as much of the Bible as we can make sense of rationally – which is to say, whatever we think we need.

A second problem with humanism is its tendency to make an idol out of humanity. When certain authors or thinkers, books or movements, or ideas or philosophies become the guiding light of all our decisions and actions, they have assumed the place of God. Whether it’s Plato or Aristotle, Marxism or capitalism, art or poetry or music, when any of these provides the framework for thinking and acting, they have become the last word on all matters, the final authority, and thus the god by which we prosecute our journey in life.

Much can be learned from humanistic studies, because humanistic teaching in many ways lines up well with the teaching of Scripture. But whenever sailing through the winds of humanism – in reading or studying, enjoying a work of art or music, or discussing philosophies and worldviews – the Christian must always keep the Scriptures foremost and our heart, mind, and conscience grounded in the Spirit of God and His teaching. Reason only functions rightly, as God intends, when it is guided and bound by true religion. Thus, Nicholas Wolterstorff set the trim for our sails some years back by refuting Kant’s understanding in his own book, *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*. Keep the Wind of God foremost in your mind, heart, and conscience, and you can glean the benefit of humanistic studies, without being carried off course by their demands for rationalism above all else.

We must test the humanistic winds that come at us from many angles, keeping Jesus as the North Star of our journey, His Word as our chart and compass, and His Wind in the sails of our soul.

For reflection

1. What are some ways that you encounter humanistic thinking?
2. Christianity is rational, but it’s not rationalistic. What’s the difference?
3. Christians have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2.16). How should this help us in gaining the benefits and avoiding the dangers of humanistic studies?

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Next steps – Preparation: Jot down some guidelines from Scripture that you think should guide you through the winds of humanism. Use these as a focus for prayer as you begin your day.

2 Secularism

But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them. 2 Corinthians 4.3, 4

Humanism's children

The various ill winds that confront us in the course of our journey in Christ are the children of humanism, that is, of the belief that human beings are the highest reality and human reason is the most reliable means to truth.

Paul suggests as much in his epistle to the Romans. In Romans 1.18-32, Paul identified two categories of people. All people, because they are made in the image of God, have a sense of God, and even, to a certain extent, true knowledge of Him. Those who acknowledge God and give Him thanks, receiving the gift of grace through Jesus Christ, constitute His true family and children (Rom. 1.16, 17; Jn. 1.12; Matt. 12.50).

But most people do not identify with this family. Most people, Paul tells us, refuse to acknowledge God or give Him thanks. But, since they are His image-bearers, they will identify with and even worship something beyond themselves, even if that something is merely a projection of their own best hopes and ideas. So they create idols and bend their lives entirely to the pursuit of those idols, whether they are imagined deities or longed-for material success of one kind or another.

Humanism encourages the view that people are their own and only reliable god. As William Ernest Henley insisted in his poem, "Invictus," "I am the master of my fate, / I am the captain of my soul." From that initial contrary wind, all other ill winds spin out and follow their chosen course. The "god of this age" to which Paul refers in 2 Corinthians 4.3 can be understood as meaning "the god which consists of this age," that is, of the spirit of the age, the dominant worldviews of the age, and as the case is in our age, humanism and all its children.

Secularism defined

Humanism makes all religious belief subservient to human reason. For Diderot and the other encyclopedists, religion is simply a sub-category of philosophy, and a way of knowing that was, in the 18th century, in the process of being eclipsed. The great success of the French *philosophes* in creating their *Encyclopedia* project was that they were able to redefine God and truth in humanist terms. By subjecting God to the mind of man, they effectively rendered Him as merely one option among many as a guiding light for life.

And this view of God as optional birthed the child of secularism from its humanist womb.

In his book, *A Secular Age*, Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor explained that "The shift to secularity...consists, among other things, of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed unproblematic, to one in which it is believed to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace."

A secular society holds that faith in God is optional. Instead of trusting God, Taylor explained, secularists look within, depending on their own best judgment and their strongest and most persistent feelings to determine what's best for them. In our society, we have changed from belief in God as "the default option", "to a condition in which for more and more people unbelieving construals seem at first blush the only plausible ones."

Indeed, "the presumption of unbelief has become dominant" in Western societies everywhere "and has achieved hegemony in certain crucial ones, in the academic and intellectual life, for instance, whence it can

more easily extend itself to others.” In other words, secularism is that wind of doctrine that insists we must make our way in life apart from any god or gods, to follow instead whatever ideas the mind of man might construe, which suit his purposes and ends, and have only as much reality and permanence as he who makes them intends they should have.

The secularist explains religion as earlier mankind’s best attempt to make sense out of his experience, and the gods of those religions as the product of naïve rational consideration. The secularist will say that such gods are fine, if you need that sort of thing. But most secularists do not, having determined that they have achieved a higher and more reliable measure of rational maturity. Instead of worshiping the unseen God of Scripture – Who speaks to them continuously throughout His creation – secularists create other ultimate and more desirable realities – wealth, success, fame, self-indulgence, and more – which they pursue with the same fervor *and faith* as any sincere believer in Jesus Christ. They have their gods, even though they do not acknowledge them as such.

We tend to think of secularism as prescribing *no God*, but in reality, secularism prescribes *as many gods as you need* to satisfy your desires and dreams. Because all secularists are made in the image of God, and are at all times the beneficiaries of God’s common grace, it is inevitable that they will accomplish many good things, and that secularism itself will promote objectives and practices which are not inimical to seeking the Kingdom of God. Secularism has provided an impetus for many good works, such as concern for the poor and the environment, universal education, and the future of the planet. Secular institutions, governments, and projects of various kinds aim at accomplishing results that promote improved lives and living conditions, and for this, believers can give thanks to God, and even participate to some extent in such secularist projects and institutions.

Problems with secularism

At the same time, we must be on guard against this ill wind child of humanism, which wends its way into the sails of our soul, where it must be recognized and controlled before it can begin to blow us off course in our journey of faith.

Thus, a believer who has a pick-and-choose attitude toward the Word of God – someone who accepts only those things in Scripture which are “easiest to embrace” – is probably under the influence of the secular wind that says we can *option* God according to our needs, likes, and interests. Or if our view of Christian faith is that it’s supposed to make us always happy, and never to inconvenience us in any way, then we’ve made God into our servant, just as secularists make gods of their own devising.

God insists on being *all* the Wind in our sails; but if we find ourselves accommodating any ideas, views, or practices that set God aside – make His way optional – so as to satisfy our own selfish desires – thus making ourselves the final arbiter of goodness, beauty, and truth – then we’re sailing more under the influence of secular thinking than that of the Holy Spirit of God.

Or if we reserve the right to make even the God of Scripture into something other than what He reveals Himself to be – making our minds the creator of God rather than God the Creator of our minds (Ps. 50.21) – we’re once again being influenced by secular thinking more than by the true Wind of God.

Whenever we find ourselves thinking or acting this way, we can know that secular winds are blowing through our thoughts, desires, and values, and that drift from our great salvation will ensue unless we take steps to recognize, resist, and reject the secularism of our day, and are renewed in the Spirit of God and His Word.

For reflection

1. What are some ways that believers sometimes make God “optional”?
2. How can we keep from making God after our own image, that is, making Him always easy to embrace?

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3. What should you do if you find that the ill wind of secularism is blowing through the sails of your soul?

Next steps – Preparation: Make sure that, whenever you are reading or studying God's Word, your mindset is: "God said it. I believe it. That settles it." Commit your time in the Word to Him and His glory.

3 Materialism

Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. Hebrews 11.1

Inescapable faith

“Seeing is believing.” That widely-held maxim is not as venerable as we might think. It has not always been the case that people have insisted we can only believe or put our trust in what we can see. Certainly no Christian would affirm such an idea. The writer of Hebrews reminds us that true and saving faith believes in hoped-for, unseen things – Jesus and the prize of eternal life with Him in the new heavens and new earth – none of which we can see with our eyes, hear with our ears, hold in our hands, taste or touch or smell.

With Augustine, the Christian says rather, “Believing is seeing.” When we believe in Christ and the promises of His Word, and as we set our minds on the things that are above, where Christ is seated in heavenly places (Col. 3.1-3), then we “see” life and all it contains as it really is, so that we know how best to make use of our time and everything that fills it. When the sails of our soul are filled with the unseen Wind of God, and all that He brings with Him, then we see just how beautiful, good, and true our lives can be.

The Christian sees the world as it really is because He believes that Jesus lived, died, rose again, ascended to heaven, rules at the Father’s right hand, and is coming again in glory. The Christian believes that the Holy Spirit has come to dwell in Him, that the Word of God is reliable and true, and that a life of sacrifice and self-denying love is the way to fullness of peace and joy. We believe these things, not because we see them with our physical eyes, but because God has spoken them to us in His Word, and we see them revealed there. The more continuously we see these promises, and the more firmly we believe them, the more clearly we see everything else. As C. S. Lewis once wrote: “I believe in Christianity like I believe in the sun, not just because I can see it, but because by it I can see everything else” (*Weight of Glory*).

It may surprise you to know that everybody lives exactly the same way, except that the “unseen things” they hope for are other than the God of Scripture and our Lord Jesus Christ. And because this is true, because they believe things other than God to be of ultimate importance or desirability, they do not see life or the world as it really is. Paul would say that their misguided *beliefs* cause them to *see* the world wrong, and they are living a lie (Rom. 1.18-32). Many people hope for wealth, greater ease and comfort, more prestige, a better job, a totally fulfilling life, a boat, or a home by the sea, or any of a thousand different things and combinations of things – all of which are, in one form or another, *material* things which such “believers” currently do not possess – and therefore these things remain “unseen” except by faith. And those who believe in such unseen things “hope for” and devote their lives to achieving them before they die.

The motto of such a materialist-centered way of life can be summed up by a bumper sticker I once saw: “He who has the most toys wins.”

Materialism defined

Materialism is the late-delivered twin of secularism. Both are the offspring of humanism; but as secularism goes further than humanism in setting aside God and religious faith, materialism goes further than secularism toward that same end. The watchwords of materialism were aptly stated by the late Carl Sagan in his book, *Cosmos*: “The cosmos is all there is or was or ever will be.”

Put another way, everything that exists is merely some form of matter, including energy. There are no spiritual realities. Materialism does not tolerate the possibility of spiritual realities. There is no God. There are no angels and no soul. Everything that exists throughout the whole vast cosmos is merely matter in one form or another. A corollary to the materialist view of life was also trumpeted by Carl Sagan: “The laws of the universe are everywhere the same.” That is, wherever you may be in the cosmos, the physical and

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mathematical laws that obtain here on earth will be just the same there as well. As we shall see, this aspect of materialism gives birth to one of humanism's most obnoxious grandchildren, scientism.

The winds of materialism blow constant and strong across the soul. They come at us from advertising, the promises and platforms of political parties, the curricula of our schools and colleges, and our natural inclination to associate happiness and wellbeing with stuff. The devoted materialist, if asked how much more stuff would ever be enough, will answer, "Just a little bit more."

And that "just a little bit more", whatever it is, remains unseen, hoped-for, and devotedly pursued, making materialism as much a form of religion as Christianity.

Problems with materialism

Much good comes from valuing material things. Material things allow us to meet our needs and those of the people we love. They bring us delight and surround us with beauty and comfort. They enable us to help meet the material needs of others and to participate in the creation and maintenance of useful institutions. The Bible does not condemn material things, nor even wealth. What it condemns is treating material things as the greatest good, and allowing material things to lead us into sin.

Materialism is reductionist, especially when it comes to human life. Everything about us – our thoughts, feelings, hopes, desires, personalities, quirks, foibles, and admirable traits – is reduced to electro-chemical processes under the influence of an impersonal cosmos. We do not choose what we are or aspire to; the impersonal material world does this for and in us. "We are stardust," Carl Sagan insisted, random, meaningless matter, wrought upon by time, chance, and our environment to make us – what?

Further, the desire for material things, as it fills the sails of our soul, can cause us to drift from the course God has charted for us in His Word. The breezes of materialism can create discontent; they can make idols out of things, lead to the misuse of time and energy, and rob God of tithes and offerings. They can lead us to mistake temporary happiness for eternal joy, and to pursue the former at the expense of the latter. They can enslave us to debt, so that we do not have adequate material resources for our daily needs or for serving others. They can also become a stumbling-block to others, as we vaunt or parade our material largesse to impress or put others in their place. The desire for material things can upset our priorities and values, pollute our affections, and mess with our minds. If even a whiff of this wind of doctrine is lingering in the sails of your soul, force it out and follow it no more.

We give thanks to God for the many material blessings with which He surrounds and sustains us. Be we must never lose sight of the fact that God is the Giver of every good gift, and therefore He is more to be desired, more to be sought, more to be loved and cherished, and more to be served than any or all material blessings we might possess or imagine. Keep the sails of your soul filled with the Wind of God, and the winds of materialism will not drive you off your course.

For reflection

1. In what sense is materialism an "advance" on secularism?
2. Materialism is an ill wind of doctrine, but material things are not evil in themselves. Explain.
3. What might be some signs that the ill wind of materialism is filling the sails of your soul?

Next steps – Demonstration: How can you use the good material gifts God has given you to bless someone in His Name today?

4 Scientism

O Timothy! Guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane and idle babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge – by professing it some have strayed concerning the faith. 1 Timothy 6.20, 21

The rise of science

I suppose that next to being called a racist, being labeled a “science-denier” is about the worst tag with which one could be branded.

In our day science holds a near hegemony over the truth. School curricula are all about STEM education (science, technology, engineering, and math), while the arts and humanities have been shunted to the side. Disciplines focusing on human life and society are being reduced to hard sciences, and everything from the workings of the mind to the longings of the heart and the development of social institutions have or are being reduced to some form of numbers-crunching.

Science, we are told, gives rise to truth, and only those truths demonstrated by science can be counted as truly true. It might be thought that the scientific enterprise emerged from some confluence of secularism and materialism – given the dedication of those worldly winds to knowing this world and all its parts and patterns in strictly physical terms.

In fact, the modern scientific enterprise arose from within the Christian community, led by thinkers who believed that the world and everything in it are gifts from God to be known, ordered, cared for, used, and enjoyed with gratitude. The early literature of science, including that of some of the most revered names in the scientific endeavor, is rife with attestations of the sovereignty, beauty, wisdom, wonder, goodness, and mystery of God which is revealed and can be known through the study of creation.

Science is a means of knowing, using protocols proven to yield understanding of the properties of things in the cosmos and of explaining how they work together. Science is a source of truth, but not truth as the apostle Paul understood it and as Christians seek to know it. For in the teaching of Scripture, everything and all the truth everything represents comes to us from God, is sustained for us by God, and finds its full and true expression as it returns glory to God (Rom. 11.36). But the scientific enterprise long ago jettisoned all sense of needing to refer its findings to God; thus what science yields is strictly *relative* truth, that is, truth as defined in terms of material reality and its uses. Truth as science explains it is true but *incomplete*, and it can even be *deceitful* to the extent it is used to obscure rather than elucidate the knowledge of God.

In our day the form of science that confronts the souls of most people is a hot wind emanating from within the scientific community which is described as scientism.

Scientism defined

Those for whom science has become *the* source of truth dismiss all other truth claims as false, irrelevant, or yet to be proven by the scientific method. Richard Dawkins speaks for this view when he writes that science “can properly claim to be the gold standard of truth” (“The Insidious Attacks on Scientific Truth,” *The Spectator*, 19 December 2020). Whatever other “truths” may be known – as through the arts or religion – don’t really matter, unless they can be reduced to science and therefore tested and replicated.

Scientism is not the same as science. Science is a valid and reliable resource for understanding and making best use of the world around us. In a very real sense, science is a gift of God through the Christian community for the wellbeing and flourishing of the world. It is a flawed endeavor, of course, as is every endeavor involving fallen, fallible, foible-ridden people. Science has limitations on what it can investigate and therefore understand by its methods and means. But that science is a great gift and necessary resource for

improving human life cannot be denied.

Scientism, on the other hand, is a development from within the scientific community which troubles even many scientists, as Atul Gawande explained in the June 10, 2016 issue of *The New Yorker*. Dr. Gawande insists that science must understand its limitations, and it must accept the fact that the knowledge science acquires is never “completely settled” but “just probable knowledge.” When people express distrust of science, it’s not really science but *scientism* and its overreaching claims that they resist.

John Gray, himself an atheist, calls on such “evangelical atheists” as Sam Harris and Daniel C. Dennett to back off their attacks on other forms of knowing, especially religion, because even their approach to science is a kind of faith. Mr. Gray acknowledges that science only works because it borrows foundational assumptions from the Christian worldview. He regards the evangelical atheists as deluded about the nature of science, humankind, and morality, and as less than forthcoming about the religious nature of their own program. His is a voice of Gamaliel amid the hubbub and ruckus of secular propagandizing and bullying.

But the tendency toward scientism is latent within the scientific community. Dr. Gawande writes that truth-seeking is a community endeavor, “a group of people – the bigger the better – pursuing ideas with curiosity, inquisitiveness, openness, and discipline.” But he also insists this is the work of scientists and the scientific method. And it is just such hubris and exclusivity that leads to scientism and provokes many to resent and even distrust the scientific community.

Problems with scientism

The worldly wind of scientism can get into the sails of our soul from a variety of sources, including public television, public schools, advertising (“a panel of scientists reports...”), and of course, the media and the Internet.

Scientism is a blustery gust of hot air cloaked in clouds of scientific knowledge, and its aim is to dislodge every other wind from your sails and own the direction of your journey. Scientism directly attacks the authority and reliability of Scripture, gleefully displaying the many ways “science” shows the Bible to be wrong. The prophets of scientism are determined to shut down or shout down every truth claim that can’t be written up in a scientific report, so they can heap scorn on believing students and dishearten Christian witness. Similarly, the proponents of a scientific worldview can make us believe that we need to *prove* our faith, or find ways of making Scripture *compatible* with the views of science. Scientism also leads us to a misguided view of assessment – goals and progress in churches – by encouraging us to use numbers in a wide variety of forms as the primary means of demonstrating the viability of our faith or the health of our churches.

All these are distractions from the true journey of faith, which we must learn to recognize and resist, looking instead to Scripture as our final standard for *all* truth, just as did our forebears in the faith who gave birth to the scientific revolution to bring glory to God and benefit to the world.

For reflection

1. Do you agree with those who insist that science is the only reliable source of truth? Explain.
2. If mere numbers aren’t the way to tell how healthy our church is, what is?
3. Do you think the scientific enterprise would be different if it operated with the template Paul set forth in Romans 11.36? Explain.

Next steps – Preparation: Jesus prayed to the Father, “Your Word is truth.” How do you apply that to your daily activities?

5 Relativism

One of them, a prophet of their own, said, "Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons." Titus 1.12

Truth obscured

It's easy to read right past Paul's quote from the Cretan philosopher Epimenides (7th or 6th century BC). Though his writings were quite old, it seems he had been enjoying something of a renaissance among the thinking people of Crete in the days when Paul and Titus were evangelizing and starting churches there.

It appears that some people on Crete were popular because they sounded profound. They spoke with eloquence, confidence, and ancient authority. They may have been glib and clever, but the effect of their teaching was to make knowing truth extremely difficult.

Let's analyze this one quote from Epimenides that Paul cited as an example of those Cretan intellectuals who were sowing discord into the body of Christ, and upsetting entire house churches by their teaching (vv. 10, 11). Their way of obscuring truth and thus of blunting the power of the Gospel was to make the issue of truth difficult if not impossible to nail down.

They said, quoting Epimenides, "Cretans *are* always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons." That was probably meant in jest, and it would have been received with a wink and a laugh by many Cretans who heard it. But look more closely. Epimenides – himself a Cretan – said that "Cretans *are* always liars." That must mean that he, too, was lying when he wrote this. So if he, like all other Cretans, was lying when he said that all Cretans are always liars, that must mean that he wasn't telling the truth about Cretans. Therefore, since he was lying about them all being liars, Cretans must instead be truth-tellers; thus, his statement was *not* a lie, but was true; and therefore, indeed, all Cretans are liars. Including Epimenides?

You can see why this would confuse people about the matter of truth. The point was to discourage folks from swallowing large and universal truth claims – like, say, the Gospel. People should think for themselves and come to their own conclusions about what's true and what they should believe.

This effort to blunt the *truth claims* of the Gospel continues today under the formal name of relativism.

Relativism defined

In 2014 President Obama awarded the National Humanities Medal to Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, an American philosopher. Dr. Goldstein believes in philosophy, and she insists that philosophy makes progress in knowing just as science does. She would appear, therefore, to be offering a view in opposition to scientism, which insists that science is the only true way of knowing, and thus the only intellectual discipline that really matters.

In an interview with *Edge* (March 16, 2016), Dr. Newberger insisted that everyone's view of life matters, and that their views matter equally. She said, "We can't pursue our lives without thinking our lives matter...Simply to take actions on the basis of desires is to act as if your life matters. It's inconceivable to pursue a human life without these kinds of presumptions – that your own life matters to some extent." So far, so good. We agree, of course, that all lives matter and everyone should be considered equally valuable because we are all made in the image of God.

But Dr. Goldstein rejects any religious ideas about how human lives matter, insisting instead "that there is an equitable distribution of mattering among humans. To the extent that any of us matters – and just try living your life without presuming that you do – we all equally matter." What does this mean? Every person's "own life deserves the assiduous attention and dedicated activity that every creature unthinkingly gives it." It's

wrong to try to figure out *why* we matter, Dr. Goldstein explained; we must simply accept that we do and get on with the business of mattering to ourselves. People have to matter on their own terms, not those of others. We have to refrain from thinking that our ideas about what matters are anything like universal ideals.

And that is the key to relativism: no universal ideas. Every person matters, so every person's view of the world, of life, and of themselves matters and ought to be encouraged: "we all matter equally."

But *mattering* is one thing; mattering *truthfully* is another. For the relativist, it is impossible to say that anything is universally true in all times and places. Everything that we might consider truthful is relative to our time, place, circumstances, interests, and needs. No universals. Truth for me, as it were.

So like those who puzzled over Epimenides in Paul's day, people today are blown about by winds of doctrine encouraging them to believe that whatever they like or desire or prefer or find interesting or helpful is *truth for them*. *Truth for me* is the watchword of relativism, which encourages a rationalist approach to life, but based on one's own sense of what finally matters.

Problems with relativism

The biggest problem with relativism is that the statement, "there are no universal truths" is itself a universal truth. So if there are no universal truths, then even that statement is not true, and there must indeed be universal truths. Relativism is hoist on its own petard.

But that doesn't mean it's not an influential way of thinking. Much damage has been done among well-meaning Christians by small group leaders who encourage us to discover what the Bible means "for me" instead of what the Bible means. The Bible *means* what God intends it to mean; how we *apply* that meaning will certainly be individually determined. We must not confuse the two.

We sometimes give the impression that when it comes to certain aspects of the life of faith, you say *potato* while I say *potabto* is just the way things are. We all just need to believe what we think God is telling us, and not think that the Bible has only one meaning in any given text.

This view of the Bible then gets applied to a wide range of matters relative to the life of faith: We all should be able to worship as we want. We should be able to pick and choose which Scriptures to obey and which to ignore. We should be tolerant of others, even when they're in sin (which makes it especially easy to tolerate ourselves when *we're* in sin). And so on.

The winds of relativism appeal to the law of sin and our natural self-interest, making us believe that our views of the Bible, of worship, of ethics, of spiritual life, and much more *matter* as much as anyone else's. And while it's true that every believer matters, because we are all God's children, it is *not* true that every believer's view of truth matters. In the Church, we do not all matter equally when it comes to truth. God's Word matters supremely; His Spirit matters above all; and following the teaching of Jesus and the apostles is our guide to mattering as God intends. We matter rightly not when we matter authentically, but when we matter according to God's Word, and for His Kingdom and glory.

And that's no lie.

For reflection

1. Why can't everyone's view of the Bible matter equally in the church?
2. How does relativism try to influence us when we're faced with some ethical decision?
3. How would you counsel a new believer to recognize the ill wind of relativism and prepare himself to resist it?

Worldly Winds

Next steps – Preparation: Today, pay attention to any worldly winds of relativism that blow across your journey. Note them, and thank God for the truth of His unchanging and unfailing Word.

6 Postmodernism

In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes. Judges 21.25

The most difficult book in the Bible

During a recent pastoral examination by the denomination in which I serve, the candidate was asked which book of the Bible he found to be the most difficult, and why. After a bit of hesitation, he explained that Hebrews was to him the most difficult book of the Bible, because he felt that every time he read it, it was as if he had never read it before, so profound and varied were its teachings.

Ask me that question, and I won't hesitate at all: Judges. Why? Because it is so sad and discouraging to see how quickly a people, abundantly blessed of God, can slip into disunity, idolatry, and tribalism. The final chapters of Judges show us a people who live nasty, brutal lives, and who gang up on an offending tribe and nearly destroy it. Only the grace of God, piquing the consciences of His people, made it possible for the tribe of Benjamin to have any continued existence whatsoever.

I read this book, I admit, hurriedly, because I want to get through it and on to the story of Ruth, where we are reassured of the transforming power of God's grace, both for that day and our own.

Judges begins with the people of Israel looking for a tribe to lead them into battle to complete the conquest of Canaan. It ends with the people of Israel looking for a tribe to punish with near destruction. It's like *Lord of the Flies* on a national scale; and it's probably appropriate that the nearly-destroyed tribe of Benjamin would supply the first king of Israel, and that he would lead *all* the tribes of Israel into near-destruction.

The tribalism we see in the book of Judges offers a distant mirror on our own day, when postmodern thinking has led to the tribalization of American society in a dog-eat-dog competition for power.

Postmodernism defined

It's difficult to give a cogent definition for postmodernism. It is what it says, a way of trying get through life without relying on the protocols of modern thinking – reason, science, technology – or society at large. Postmodernism represents a confluence of several philosophical notions. It is anti-rational in that it counsels us not to yield to the idea that science is the last word in everything. It is self-authenticating, and thus provides a safe harbor for the personal “mattering” that relativism promotes. And it is highly individualistic, drawing from existentialist and pragmatic thinking to encourage us to do our own thing, go our own way, make our own mark in life.

All of which combine to demonstrate that postmodernism is not really a viable worldview. Primarily, postmodernism is a kind of frustrated rant against the brutality, oppression, and political scheming of our humanist, secular, and materialist age. As an alternative to modernism, postmodernism is a failure, which is why we have now entered a period of post-postmodernism, and it's not clear what new worldly winds of doctrine will blow next.

For now, however, postmodernism lingers in an adapted form, which we might call tribalism. Because postmodernists could not live with the idea that every individual should be allowed to do whatever seemed right in his own eyes, they encouraged the view that truth is communal, and that each of us needs to find that group or community, or tribe of like-minded postmodernists where our views are welcomed, affirmed, strengthened, and extended through the acquisition and exercise of power in various forms.

It's not hard to see the appeal of postmodernism and tribalism. Someone to affirm our views. Ways to express ourselves that have the support of a community. Tribal actions that affirm the validity of our group-

think and allow us to achieve a measure of public presence. The ability to join in common causes with other tribes, especially to aim for tribal takeovers and, when possible, the elimination of competing tribes.

There is some truth here, but postmodernism and tribalism are not so much high ground to claim as they are slippery slopes to power politics.

Problems with postmodern tribalism

The Christian movement has in many ways been a precursor of the tribalism of our postmodern moment. Prior to the Great Schism of the 11th century, when the Bishop of Rome and the Metropolitan (Bishop) of Constantinople mutually excommunicated each other, the Church was essentially one Body with one common creed and mission. Yes, there were offshoots and sub-groups within that framework, but not so markedly or with such mutual hostility as began to be in evidence following the Great Schism.

Then, in the 16th century, when Protestant expressions of the faith began to appear, the body of Christ fragmented further, as new tribes arose to stake out their corner on the truth. Since then, more than 35,000 different *denominations* have emerged, and almost none of these has anything to do with any others. The unity of the Body of Christ for which Jesus prayed (Jn. 17.21), and which Paul said we must work hard to maintain (Eph. 4.3), is virtually non-existent.

And nobody seems to care.

This tribalization of the faith continues in our day, even within fragments of the Body of Christ that would seem to have almost everything in common – such as evangelicalism, or Pentecostalism, or even Roman Catholicism. We have accepted this tribal framework as normal, and we almost never make any attempt to find a common core of truth, set our differences aside, and get on with being the Body of Christ together, community by community. The tribal nature of our condition is evident in the various ways we turn to political power to bolster the place of our tribe. It's no wonder the world doesn't believe us when we say that Jesus has been sent from the Father for the salvation of the world.

We find this tribalizing instinct even within local churches, where cliques – “teams”, “ministries”, and so forth – with competing interests stake their claim on the church's budget and facilities; critics recruit followers to support their views against the pastor; and where it never occurs to any church leader or member to try to do something together with the other like-minded churches in the community. We all have our truth, and it seems right to us; so we just soldier on within our tribe. We've lost sight of the beauty of Christian unity (Ps. 133) and of its importance as a witness to the living Christ (Acts 6.1-6; Jn. 17.17).

The wind of postmodern tribalism has become a growing tempest in our day. Christians need to recognize this trend for what it is – a force for destruction rather than edification – and find new ways of trimming their sails into the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace.

For reflection

1. In a sense, tribalism is an acceleration of postmodernism, rather than its replacement. Explain.
2. Postmodern tribes vie for power, primarily through the agency of government. Is this the kind of power Christians should seek? Explain.
3. In a local church, what can we do to keep the ill wind of postmodern tribalism from filling the sails of our soul?

Next steps – Preparation: What are some of the primary “tribes” vying for power in our society today? How should the Church seek to relate to these?

7 Evolutionism

... *knowing this first: that scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts, and saying, "Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation."* 2 Peter 3.3, 4

Science and knowing

Science, as we have seen, is a reliable means of knowing the physical universe, up to a point. Those who work in the various fields of science proceed by observation, hypothesis, testing, and confirmation to declare their findings and conclusions about the material world and how it works. Using this method, science has brought many important truths to light, and has led to many wonderful inventions and technologies to benefit humankind.

Any branch or division of knowledge that stops short of giving glory, honor, and deference to God is only dealing in partial truth. The truth is in Jesus Christ, for of Him and through Him and unto Him are all things (Rom. 11.36). Jesus *is* the truth (Jn. 14.6). When science makes conclusions, applications, or – as the case may be – speculations that depart from or contradict the truth that is in Jesus, then science has become something other than a way of knowing truly. It has become a kind of religion, and one that intends to cancel Biblical religion in the name of science.

We see this tendency in many ways, for example, in the field of cosmogony. Cosmogony is that branch of science which studies the origins of the material universe; and right away we have a problem. First, we cannot observe the origins of the material universe, and we have no accounts of human beings pondering this notion or positing ideas about it before about 4,000 years ago. Cosmogony is not a true science; it is instead a philosophical discipline.

But it is more than that. Cosmogony proceeds on the foundation of two basic assumptions, two articles of faith: That the universe has always operated the way it does at present, and that evolution provides the most reliable framework for understanding the beginnings of the cosmos and all things else. Neither of these assumptions is susceptible to being proven by the methods of science. Each is merely an assumption, a faith stance and not a fact, and therefore not necessarily the only or best way of understanding the cosmos. Each contradicts the teaching of Scripture.

Each of these assumptions takes a valid observation about certain aspects of the cosmos – evolution – and sets it as the driving force and explanation of everything in the universe. This goes beyond the methods of science and is an act of faith which we may refer to as *evolutionism*.

Evolutionism defined

Evolution is part of the process God uses to manage and sustain the created world. We see it in all kinds of ways, and not just with respect to the physical world. Evolution occurs in the realms of ideas, culture, and even human psychology. We might even say that the idea of God redeeming and reconciling the world to Himself through Jesus Christ evolved throughout the Scriptures, as insight built on insight, type added to type, and symbols and prophecies compounded to such an extent that the first Christians were able to look back through Jesus and see Him throughout the Old Testament, precisely as He had said (Jn. 5.39).

But whereas evolution is a demonstrable fact of certain aspects of life, *evolutionism* is not. Rather, evolutionism takes one process by which Christ upholds the world and everything in it and makes it the driving force of all reality, subjecting everything that exists to a putative process of gradual development over long periods of time, and reducing everything to matter and time, governed by chance.

Evolutionism today holds a hegemony over all frameworks of knowing, so that every source of knowledge is only reliable which wears the glass slipper of evolutionary thinking. Anyone who hesitates or questions evolutionism might not be appropriate as a teacher in America's schools, as Jeffrey Mervis explained in an article in *Science* ("Why many U.S. biology teachers are 'wishy-washy'", 6 March 2015).

Mervis reported that apparently some teachers consider evolution a "controversial topic" and prefer not to address it head-on. In his view they "lack the necessary knowledge, conviction, and role models to teach evolution properly." Students also resist bowing to the religion of evolutionism. One survey indicated that, in spite of the best efforts of science teachers, "religious faith" remains a strong alternative view for many students. What's wrong with these people who "routinely disregard solid scientific evidence in forming their views" about the cosmos?

What's wrong with them – teachers and students alike – is that they're not being given evidence but speculation, and views of the cosmos that are not persuasive, given their belief in God and His Word.

Problems with evolutionism

Evolutionism challenges and dismisses the teaching of Scripture about the origins of the cosmos, life, and humankind. Whereas Christian cosmogony sees the creation period as a unique time in the life of the cosmos, evolutionism, projecting backward from present observations, assumes that the cosmos has always operated as it does now, and thus it must be much older, and have begun in a much different manner than what we find in the Bible.

Evolutionism has been adopted as a convenient way of describing the physical world and everything else, without having to resort to God. Indeed, as C. S. Lewis explained, it's even worse than that: "Has it come to that? Does the whole vast structure of modern naturalism depend not on positive evidence but simply on an a priori metaphysical prejudice? Was it devised not to get in facts but to keep out God?" ("Is Theology Poetry?" in *Weight of Glory*)

Indeed it was, and indeed it does. Wherever evolutionism finds a home in serious thought and conversation, God and His revelation are on the way out. The two religions simply do not mix. The Bible, subjected to evolutionism, has to be re-explained so that it becomes merely a word from men which is largely irrelevant to contemporary life. Lewis wrote that evolutionism has become "the deepest habit of mind in the contemporary world." But he added, "It seems to me immensely implausible."

But when theologians and pastors genuflect at the altar of evolutionism, the Bible loses its integrity and reliability, humankind becomes merely another form of animal life, angels and the spiritual realm cease to exist, morality becomes uncertain and relative, and the Gospel of Jesus Christ is transformed into a psychological phenomenon merely. As one well-known theologian explained to me some years ago, when I challenged his view of the resurrection, "T. M., really, everyone knows that dead people don't rise."

Once the ill wind of evolutionism begins to fill the sails of your soul, Biblical religion is on the way out. Peter was leery of those who doubted the cosmogony set forth in Scripture, and we should be as well. He was speaking of his own day, of course, but he might just as well have been speaking of ours.

For reflection or discussion

1. How does evolutionism undermine the reliability of Scripture?
2. Evolutionism denies that morality is absolute. How does this affect the way some people read the Bible?
3. How can you tell when your thinking is being affected by the ill wind of evolutionism?

Worldly Winds

Next steps – Preparation: Review your own thinking about the Bible, morality, and the world around us. Do you see any evidence of evolutionism in your thinking?

Worldly Winds

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. In what sense is humanism the “mother” of all other worldly winds?
2. From what sources do these worldly winds blow at us? How can we protect ourselves against them?
3. What is the difference between evolution and evolutionism?
4. How can believers help one another to avoid these troubling worldly winds?
5. What’s the most important lesson you’ve learned from this second part of our study, *Winds of Doctrine*?

For prayer:

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