

Eschatological Discipleship is a brilliant book. In it, Trevin Wax argues that Christian discipleship cannot be reduced to the transmission of timeless truths that float above history and culture. Instead, Christian discipleship always and necessarily involves confronting the ideologies and rival eschatologies of our own contemporary context. In our own era, he argues, we must confront the Enlightenment, the Sexual Revolution, and modern consumerism as rival eschatologies, exposing them as frauds and offering the gospel as our one-and-only hope.”

—**Bruce Ashford**, provost and dean of faculty,
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Trevin Wax’s *Eschatological Discipleship* is a much-needed book that teaches that followers of Jesus are shaped in their thinking and actions by Jesus’s kingship, and by the coming kingdom. God’s future—including our future in it—constructs a worldview and supplies us with wisdom for living in the current age. Ultimately, every worldview, whether secularist or Islamic, has a view of the ‘end.’ By knowing God’s plan for the end, we will be better equipped to work for the kingdom here on earth.”

—**Michael F. Bird**, lecturer in theology, Ridley College,
Melbourne, Australia

“With the publication of *Eschatological Discipleship*, Trevin Wax has solidified his role as an important Christian voice for the next generation. The call to biblical faithfulness, serious cultural engagement, careful worldview thinking, and long-term eschatological discipleship is masterfully and winsomely presented. Wax has provided us with a clearly written, insightful, well-researched, and illuminating work that will be essential reading for thoughtful Christian leaders in the church and in the academy. It is a genuine joy to recommend this outstanding work”

—**David S. Dockery**, president, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“Discipleship and eschatology are not often thought of in tandem. Discipleship is about following Jesus here and now, while eschatology is about what happens then and there. But in this important book, Trevin Wax shows the coinherence of these two biblical themes. An impressive theological study written with an eye for Great Commission reflection and praxis.”

—**Timothy George**, founding dean,
Beeson Divinity School of Samford University

“It is not a matter of whether eschatology will shape the church’s life but only a matter of which one. Discipleship, a burning need in the syncretistic American church, surely needs to be reenvisioned in terms of equipping God’s people to more and more live out of a biblical eschatology of the kingdom. In this book Trevin Wax takes up this challenge and encounters the two most powerful rival eschatologies of our day—the Enlightenment notion of progress, and consumerism. I pray that God will use this book to enable the American church to reimagine discipleship in its missionary setting.”

—**Michael W. Goheen**, director of theological education, Missional Training Center, and adjunct professor of missional theology, Covenant Theological Seminary

“The philosopher Martin Heidegger famously defined human existence as ‘being-toward-death,’ a posture that generates anxiety in view of our limited time. Trevin Wax does him one better: the Christian life is a matter of being-towards-discipleship, and discipleship is a matter of being-towards-*end*-time. Disciples take their bearings from the story of Jesus, especially its end: the hope of resurrection. Wax convincingly sets out the biblical basis for ‘eschatological discipleship,’ which means the importance of waking up (and staying awake) to the reality that our citizenship in heaven begins now.”

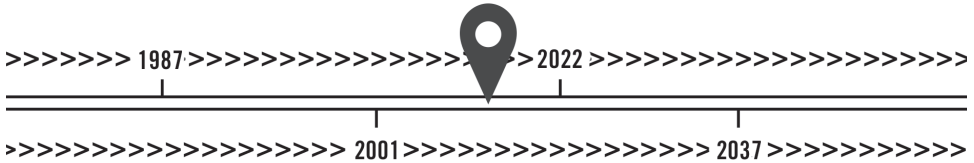
—**Kevin J. Vanhoozer**, research professor of systematic theology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

ESCHATOLOGICAL

DISCIPLESHIP

TREVIN K. WAX

ESCHATOLOGICAL



DISCIPLESHIP

Leading Christians to Understand
Their Historical and Cultural Context

Eschatological Discipleship
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To
Corina,

whose love and sacrifice enabled this pursuit.

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INTRODUCTION

Eschatological Discipleship and Contemporary Christianity

➤ It is sometimes said of people who constantly think about or speak of eternal matters, “They are so heavenly minded they are of no earthly good.” The popular saying gives the impression of a believer whose head is “in the clouds,” isolated from the hustle and bustle of everyday life and the practical needs that impinge upon us here below. The saying intends to downplay the importance of eschatology in the life of a Christian by suggesting that looking too much to the future will undermine obedience or, at the least, rob the effectiveness and relevance of such obedience in the present.

The problem with this statement is that it fails to do justice not only to Scripture but also to church history, most notably the evidence of Christian influence on society. C. S. Lewis once countered this notion and made an opposing claim, “If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. . . . It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this one.”¹ Was Lewis right? Or does the popular saying remain true?

A cursory glance through some contemporary discipleship books may, at first, lend credence to the idea that one should take care not to be “too heavenly minded.” We find a disconnect between books on discipleship, many of which focus on spiritual disciplines or our motivation for obedience, and “end times” titles, which seem to surface in every generation and offer new applications of the apocalyptic imagery of Revelation. Is it possible that evangelical Christians have simultaneously amplified *and* reduced

1. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis Signature Classics (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2009), 134.

the importance of eschatology? (Amplified in the sense that so much attention is given to a narrow sliver of debates about the end times. Reduced in the sense that the broader vision of eschatology no longer has much to do with our day-to-day lives or discipleship as a process.)

If, as Lewis writes, believers have become “ineffective” in this world because they fail to think of the next, then perhaps the separation of discipleship from eschatology is partially to blame. Divorced from eschatology, discipleship may lead us to adopt personal interior-focused practices but fail to give sufficient attention to the kind of spiritual formation that helps us recognize the present context and our role in it. Likewise, eschatology, divorced from a larger vision of discipleship (or eschatology reduced to debates about the timing of Christ’s return), may lead us to an inordinate focus on historical and interpretative curiosities rather than sound exegesis that helps us discern the Bible’s overarching vision of the world and our future.

Here is the problem: our understanding of discipleship is deficient if it includes only a nod toward our eschatological hope or if it reduces our eschatological hope to its personal dimension (living in light of our coming death and afterlife). Likewise, our understanding of eschatology is deficient if it fails to encompass the broader sense of the Bible’s grand story, which motivates and informs many New Testament ethical exhortations. A shrunken view of discipleship misses eschatology, and a shrunken view of eschatology fails to impact discipleship. The result is that Christians may be left without the necessary tools to read the signs of our own times or navigate the darkness of the contemporary age. We may fail to see how discipleship equips us to see current challenges in the light of God’s coming kingdom.

Bringing together eschatology and discipleship is the primary purpose of this book. However, as soon as we begin this task, we are faced with a number of pressing questions. *What do we mean by eschatology? Are we speaking of eschatology as the future of the world, the church, and the individual believer? Or are we speaking of eschatology in its broader reference to the great story of our world? Is there biblical precedent in the Old or New Testaments for linking our obedience as Christ’s followers to eschatological realities? If so, where and how do these links occur?*

The questions concerning discipleship also multiply. *What is discipleship, and how does it relate to the mission of the church? How is our obedience motivated by eschatological reality? How do we contextualize our mission*

for the times in which we live? What role does worldview formation play in the making of disciples, and what role does eschatology play in the formation of a worldview? How does our mission of proclaiming the gospel as the true story of the world interact with and confront rival eschatologies? How can we strengthen various conceptions of discipleship by giving more attention to their eschatological dimension?

These are the questions we will examine at length in the course of this work.

What Is Eschatological Discipleship?

Because discipleship in a New Testament sense is holistic (encompassing all of life) and contextualized (the way believers put Jesus's teachings into practice will look different in various cultural contexts), discipleship is also "eschatological"; that is, it is a type of spiritual formation and obedience that takes into account the contemporary setting in which one finds oneself, particularly in relation to rival conceptions of time and progress.

In this book I make a case for an eschatological understanding of discipleship on the basis of the New Testament authors' consistent appeals to eschatology when exhorting Christians to live according to biblical ethics. My goal is to demonstrate the need for churches to reenvision disciple making as spiritual formation that goes beyond the adoption of personal spiritual disciplines or engagement in church-related activities to a missionary encounter and confrontation with the world. Additionally, I hope to show the importance of asking the question "What time is it?" in order to understand a worldview properly and then illustrate the importance of this question for missiology by countering the prevailing rival eschatologies of our current cultural moment in order to display our unique identity as kingdom citizens.

An Outline of This Book

In chapter 1, we define four key words that help explain what is meant by the term *eschatological discipleship*. These words are *discipleship*, *worldview*, *eschatology*, and *wisdom*.

In part 2 (chaps. 2–4), we focus on the biblical foundation for seeing an eschatological component to the forming of disciples. We begin with Old Testament examples of spiritual formation in historical and wisdom literature, particularly the connections to the New Testament's further fulfillment

of spiritual development. We continue (chap. 3) with an examination of some of Jesus's teachings in both propositional and parabolic form, showing how discipleship is often viewed as "living in light of what time it is," according to the eschatological timetable. We examine the eschatological dimension of the commissioning texts of Jesus in Matthew and Luke (Matt 28:16-20; Luke 24:44-49; Acts 1:6-9) in light of Jesus's ethical teachings. Chapter 4 includes an exposition of Paul's ethical exhortations rooted in his distinctive eschatological vision, showing how eschatology both shapes and motivates Christian ethics.

In part 3 (chaps. 5-8), we build on the definition of and biblical examples of eschatological discipleship by showing how a Christian answer to the worldview question, "What time is it?," necessarily counters rival eschatologies in North America in the twenty-first century. These chapters examine three rival worldviews with their own eschatological visions: (chap. 6) the Enlightenment (a view of history that sees society as shedding the supernatural superstitions of the past on the march of progress toward a future of technological and scientific advancement); (chap. 7) the sexual revolution (a view of history wherein the staid morality of previous generations is rejected in favor of a wide-ranging embrace of any and all consensual sexual pleasure as a mark of progress and tolerance); and (chap. 8) consumerism (a view of life and history that sees a progressive line toward happiness found in what is created and consumed). Eschatological discipleship includes the equipping of contemporary disciples in the church to understand and counteract these rival eschatologies in light of their identity as God's kingdom people.

In part 4, we survey common evangelical conceptions of discipleship that fall into three distinct categories: (1) discipleship conceived of as primarily evangelistic reproduction, (2) discipleship in terms of personal piety (expressed through the adoption of spiritual disciplines), and (3) discipleship that is gospel centered in its motivation. The purpose of this brief survey is not to argue for one approach to discipleship over another, or even to make the case that these three conceptions are the most common ones found in evangelicalism, but rather to show how each approach would benefit from training people to think eschatologically—to ask and answer the worldview question "What time is it?" in the culture in which they are called to submit to Jesus as Lord.



PART 1

*Defining Eschatological
Discipleship*

CHAPTER 1

Toward a Definition of *Eschatological Discipleship*

➤ Defining the term *eschatological discipleship* requires a clear explanation of what is meant by *eschatology* and *discipleship*. Furthermore, *worldview* and *wisdom* relate to the definition toward which we are working. Because these terms will be used throughout this book, we will analyze them one-by-one before combining them into a definition.

Discipleship

Discipleship involves a holistic vision of life as a believer seeks to follow Jesus. Discipleship entails more than the transfer of biblical information or the affirmation of correct doctrines because it includes certain actions and sentiments that bear witness to the gospel.

Defining *discipleship* in a holistic manner such as this is in line with a number of contemporary theologians. For example, Kevin Vanhoozer defines a disciple as “one who seeks to speak, act, and live in ways that *bear witness to the truth, goodness, and beauty of Jesus Christ*.”¹ Vanhoozer’s definition emphasizes discipleship as something people *do*, not something they *are* or *say* they believe. The focus is on “bearing witness.”

Similarly, Anthony Thiselton points out that one’s faith is “*action-oriented, situation-related, and embedded in the particularities and contingencies of everyday living*.”² Discipleship, then, is not only understanding the truth about Jesus in a cognitive manner but also presenting the truth through words and deeds in a particular time and place. Discipleship

1. Kevin Vanhoozer, *Faith Speaking Understanding: Performing the Drama of Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 2014), 20 (emphasis in original).

2. Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 21 (emphasis in original).

necessarily bends toward practice, as is made clear by Jesus Christ's command to "Follow me!"³ There is a sense, then, in which true understanding of Christian doctrine has not occurred until the one who has faith has put that faith into action.

1. Discipleship Is Balanced

If a disciple is one who follows and bears witness to Christ, then the goal of discipleship must be Christlikeness, and Christlikeness is a holistic notion including not only right belief but also right practice and right sentiment. Baptist ecclesialogist Gregg Allison rightly notes that the disciple-making process should consist of a balance between these three elements. First, followers of Christ should be characterized by orthodoxy (sound doctrine). Second, followers of Christ must be known for orthopraxis (right practice). Third, the follower of Christ must exude *orthopatheia* (proper sentiment).⁴ When any one of these three elements is excluded from a disciple's development, the other two elements are adversely affected, and the mission of the church is hindered because Christlikeness suffers.⁵

Discipleship, then, includes the educational ministry of the church, but this education transcends the classroom because it includes more than merely the transfer of information. Indeed, Allison recommends a discipleship model that consists of indoctrination,⁶ character building, and worldview development, the latter of which he defines as "the formation of gospel-oriented disciples in terms of their feelings, assessment of moral and social issues, and purpose for living." This development is necessary in equipping people to be effective in their abilities "to evangelize, disciple,

3. Matthew 4:19; 8:22; 9:9; 10:38; 16:24; 19:21; 19:28; Mark 1:17; 2:14; 8:34; 10:21; Luke 5:27; 9:23; 9:59; 18:22; and John 1:43; 8:12; 10:27; 12:26; 21:19; and 21:22.

4. Gregg Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 441.

5. Francis A. Schaeffer, *Letters of Francis A. Schaeffer: Spiritual Reality in the Personal Christian Life* (ed. Lane T. Dennis; Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1985). Additionally, these three elements of balanced discipleship may refer to the church corporately. Responding to a letter in which someone asked him for advice on finding a church, Francis Schaeffer used the terms "orthodoxy of doctrine" and "orthokardia of community."

6. Vanhoozer, *Faith Speaking Understanding*, 53. The term *indoctrination* often has a negative connotation, as if it means people are being brainwashed or forced to accept something against their will. These negative associations should not deter us from using the term, properly understood, which refers to the fact that, in the words of Kevin Vanhoozer, "Doctrine is inevitable. We've all been *indoctrinated*: everyone has absorbed some system of beliefs and values. . . . Indoctrination is always happening: in homes, schools, the workplace, sometimes even in church. The only question is whether it is truly Christian."

show mercy, and engage in other church ministries.”⁷ The question of worldview development will be treated in more detail below.

2. Discipleship Is Modeled

Disciple making is accomplished by modelers, not just messengers. We develop not merely through cognitive transfer but also through witnessing the lives and choices of other disciples we encounter on our way. Perhaps this is the reason the Old Testament emphasizes the meditation and memorization of Scripture *alongside* conversations about the law that take place in the daily rhythms of life.⁸ As Oliver O’Donovan points out, “The disciple is, literally, ‘a learner,’ but at the same time, given the patterns of rabbinic learning current in Jesus’ day, a ‘follower.’ The cognitive and affective are bound together in the life of the disciple who learns by following and follows by learning.”⁹ This emphasis corresponds with the New Testament picture of Jesus with his disciples. Jesus was always teaching, not just through his public discourses but also through his actions.

The idea of “modeling,” and specifically “imitation,” seems to have fallen out of favor among some contemporary evangelicals, perhaps because of an overemphasis on practicing virtues that has sometimes led to a tiresome moralizing of biblical texts,¹⁰ or perhaps the reason is that imitation is no longer thought of as part of the discipleship process. People are more likely to see spiritual direction as the individual’s responsibility to fulfill certain requirements common to Christians. However, a neglect of “imitation” and “modeling” language in the discipleship process leads to other problems, including an overemphasis on technique or a classroom

7. Allison, *Sojourners*, 443.

8. Psalm 119, for example, is heavy on the need for learning and internalizing the law of God, while Deuteronomy 6 focuses on the frequent discussions of the law’s significance and application in everyday life. Widder says, “YHWH’s instructions are taught so they can be done. Implicit in much of this kind of teaching is the need for repetition—both by the teacher and in the practice of the student.” Wendy L. Widder, *“To Teach” in Ancient Israel: A Cognitive Linguistic Study of a Biblical Hebrew Lexical Set* (Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2014), 118.

9. Oliver O’Donovan, *Finding and Seeking: Ethics as Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 2:117.

10. Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988); Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005); Dennis Johnson, *Him We Proclaim: Proclaiming Christ from All the Scriptures* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007); and Jonathan Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Widely: A Narrative and Theological Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 163. Many preaching manuals and hermeneutics texts counter an overdependence on biblical characters as examples of morality. The caution against moralistic preaching warns about the potential loss of the redemptive thread of the Bible’s story line. Still, as Jonathan Pennington reminds us, “A crucial part of understanding the identification role of the Gospels is recognizing that other characters in the stories provide important models either for emulation or avoidance” (163).

experience. A biblical understanding of discipleship involves “modeling” at two levels, imitation of behavior (what one does) and imitation of reasoning (how one thinks).

Modeling takes place through the imitation of behavior. Modeling is a central component of being a disciple and of making disciples. Surveying the landscape of various approaches to spiritual direction (often under terms such as “spiritual director,” “spiritual guide,” “spiritual friend,” “mentor,” or in evangelical parlance, “discipler”), Victor Copan provides a working definition of the concept: “Spiritual direction is the (variegated) means by which one person intentionally influences another person or persons in the development of his life as a Christian with the goal of developing his relationship to God and His purposes for that person in the world.”¹¹

Using this definition as a baseline, Copan turns to the example of the apostle Paul. Interestingly, the Gospels do not include any specific commands from Jesus concerning imitation, even though numerous calls were present to follow him. In Paul’s letters, the reverse is true. Paul urged people to imitate him as he followed Christ (1 Cor 4:16; 11:1). Copan shows that the emulation of human beings was widespread in ancient literature, with particular focus on the classical virtues, specific actions of respected individuals, or the overall mimicking of another person’s lifestyle and character. Paul utilized the relational spheres common to ancient literature (parent-child, teacher-student, and leader-people), often choosing to rely more heavily on one sphere or another, depending on his particular intentions. As Copan notes, imitation in the ancient world was directed toward the improvement of character, and it was viewed positively (although thoughtless mimicry was viewed negatively).¹²

In Paul’s Corinthian correspondence Copan notices a specific and a general referent in Paul’s desire for the church to imitate him. Specifically, he points to Paul’s life of humble, sacrificial service to others and his rejection of the world’s view of wisdom, strength, and honor. Generally everything in Paul’s life (“actions, virtues, emotions, and lifestyle”) that flows

11. Victor A. Copan, *Saint Paul as Spiritual Director: An Analysis of the Concept of the Imitation of Paul with Implications and Applications to the Practice of Spiritual Direction* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2007), 39.

12. *Ibid.*, 70-71; and Vanhoozer, *Faith Speaking Understanding*, 117. Vanhoozer also distinguishes between mimicry and imitation, as he states, “It is one thing to *mimic* faith, quite another to achieve a true *mimesis* (from Gk. *mimesis*, imitation) of the great cloud of witnesses that make up the biblical roll call of faith (Heb. 11:1-38).”

from his service to Christ is in view when he called the Corinthians to imitate him.¹³

Other theologians support the contention that modeling is essential for being a disciple and making disciples.¹⁴ Missionary theologian Lesslie Newbigin, for example, writes that “a true Christian pastor will be one who can dare to say to his people: ‘Follow me, as I am following Jesus.’” He goes on to say, “A true pastor must have such a relation with Jesus and with his people that he follows Jesus and they follow him.”¹⁵ Notice the double relationship here, the relationship with Jesus and the relationship with people. In relationship with Jesus, the pastor is a disciple; in relationship with people, the pastor is a discipler. Both of these aspects are included in discipleship, and both of these aspects point toward a definition of discipleship that includes modeling. Though Newbigin was speaking of pastors, the same truth is relevant for all those who follow Christ and make disciples.

Similarly, Jason Hood writes, “A maturing believer in Jesus can present herself as a model for others to imitate. In fact, if she is faithful to her identity in Christ, she must become a model.”¹⁶ A key component of the discipleship process, then, is imitating the behavior of people who are following Christ.

Modeling takes place through the imitation of reasoning. In emphasizing discipleship as something that is modeled, we might be tempted to think of “imitation” as merely a matter of activity. In other words we might be inclined to think of discipleship in two stages: (1) the inculcation of Christian doctrine (information), and (2) the imitation of Christian behavior (modeling). However, the New Testament does not distinguish between these stages. Instead, it brings together the informational and imitational aspects of discipleship and, in the process, transcends them.

13. Copan, *Saint Paul*, 124.

14. Vanhoozer, *Faith Speaking Understanding*, 123–24, reclaims imitation language and specifically applies it to disciples. He insists, “Imitation (*mimesis*) is an important biblical principle. Saints are to imitate both good (3 John 11) and God (Eph 5:1). If this direction was all disciples had to go on, they would have difficulty determining what to do; it is hard to imitate abstractions. Fortunately, most biblical references to imitation are more specific. . . . Disciples imitate their masters. Masters are role models because their actions provide a template that guides the actions of their followers.”

15. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Good Shepherd: Meditations on Christian Ministry in Today's World*, accessed August 28, 2015, <http://newbigin.net/assets/pdf/77gs.pdf>.

16. Jason B. Hood, *Imitating God in Christ: Recapturing a Biblical Pattern* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 156; and Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 102. Similarly, Hauerwas and Willimon describe Christian ethics as “aristocratic,” that is: “It is not something that comes naturally. It can only be learned. We are claiming, then, that a primary way of learning to be disciples is by being in contact with others who are disciples.”

One of the most important ways the New Testament vision of discipleship transcends the boundary between “information” and “imitation” is its emphasis on the believer’s union with Christ. What keeps imitation from slipping into hypocrisy is the reality that disciples are acting in accordance with the Christ who indwells them. “What disciples act *out* is their being *in* Christ.”¹⁷ It is not surprising, then, to see that biblical imitation is not described as thoughtless mimicry but as having the mind of Christ (Phil 2:5) in order to respond to new circumstances with the humility and wisdom of the Savior who indwells believers by his Spirit.

Another way the New Testament vision of discipleship transcends the line between information and imitation is in revealing the connection between imitation and reasoning in Paul’s interactions with the Corinthians. There Paul’s focus on imitation is more comprehensive than a mere correspondence between his own activities and what he desires the church to do. Paul wanted the people to follow the same “reasoning process” that led him to such actions; he wanted the Corinthians to display the same “ethos.”¹⁸ To put it another way, modeling the Christian life includes the cultivation of wisdom from within a biblical framework, wisdom that leads to the right decisions when the circumstances are difficult. Passing on the capability of wise reflection is an important aspect of discipleship, leading to the next element of the discipleship process, a worldview.

3. Discipleship Is Worldview Oriented

Disciple making presupposes a worldview, viewing the world through a Christian lens. If disciple making begins with conversion, believers must ask themselves the question, What is conversion? Missiologist Paul Hiebert argues true conversion is comprehensive, encompassing three levels: behavior, beliefs, and the worldview that underlies those behaviors and beliefs.¹⁹ The neglect of this latter element (worldview transformation) is largely responsible for syncretism, where people convert to Christianity by adopting certain beliefs, or by changing certain behaviors, without

17. Vanhoozer, *Faith Speaking Understanding*, 125.

18. Copan, *Saint Paul*, 137. Similarly, when Paul wrote to Timothy about what the younger disciple had learned from him, he mentioned “teaching,” and then added elements that were only available through imitation of behavior and reasoning: “conduct, purpose, faith, patience, love, and endurance, along with the persecutions and sufferings that came to me” (2 Tim 3:10–11).

19. Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 11.

ever having the structural issues, the scaffolding of their old worldviews, challenged.²⁰

Why do these dimensions of a worldview matter? Because people matter, and if one is to get to know people in their efforts to present the gospel, they must take their belief systems seriously.²¹ Worldviews matter for both the calling of disciples (believers should know and love other people in order to be effective in sharing the gospel) and in the formation of disciples (believers should be transformed by the renewing of their minds as they seek to follow Christ).

Biblical faith presupposes a worldview because faith is directed toward the God who directs this world. As Albert Wolters suggests, believers “look to the Scriptures for a ‘biblical worldview’—now taking that term in an expanded sense to refer to an overall perspective on the world and human life in general.”²² He elaborates:

Biblical faith in fact involves a worldview, at least implicitly and in principle. The central notion of creation (a *given* order of reality), fall (human mutiny at the root of all perversion of the given order) and redemption (unearned restoration of the order in Christ) are cosmic and transformational in their implications. Together with other elements . . . these central ideas . . . give believers the fundamental outline of a completely anti-pagan *Weltanschauung*, a worldview which provides the interpretive framework for history, society, culture, politics, and everything else that enters human experience.²³

Building upon all that has been seen about discipleship up to this point, our focus now turns to the formative worldview aspect of disciple making and the definition of *worldview* as a term.

20. Paul Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000).

21. Tim Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 120. Keller sees the first step in contextualization as seeking to understand and “as much as possible, identify with your listeners. It involves learning to express people’s hopes, objections, fears, and beliefs so well that they feel as though they could not express them better themselves.”

22. Al Wolters, “No Longer Queen: The Theological Disciplines and Their Sisters,” in *The Bible and the University*, Scripture and Hermeneutics Series (ed. David Jeffrey Lyle and C. Stephan Evans; Nashville: Zondervan, 2007), 8:73.

23. Albert M. Wolters, “Gustavo Gutierrez,” in *Bringing into Captivity Every Thought: Capita Selecta in the History of Christian Evaluations of Non-Christian Philosophy* (ed. J. Kapwijk, S. Griffioen, and G. Groenewoud; Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1991), 237.

Worldview

If disciple making includes the inculcation of a Christian worldview, then we must ask what we mean when we use this term. In this section we engage in a brief historical overview of the term *worldview*, consider what it is, how it functions, the questions it answers, and respond to a few contemporary criticisms of the concept.

History of Worldview as a Concept

The German word *Weltanschauung* was first used by Immanuel Kant in 1790.²⁴ By the 1840s, it was commonly accepted in the vocabulary of the educated German. Describing the idea behind this word, Albert Wolters writes, “Basic to the idea of *Weltanschauung* is that it is a point of view on the world, a perspective on things, a way of looking at the cosmos from a particular vantage point. It therefore tends to carry the connotation of being personal, dated, and private, limited in validity by its historical conditions.”²⁵

Whereas Kant introduced the term in reference to one’s understanding of the world and where one fits in it, other philosophers, such as Friedrich Schelling (1775-1854) and William Dilthey (1833-1911), emphasized the comprehensive nature of worldview thinking and the inherent plurality and relativity of worldviews.²⁶ Historians and anthropologists adopted the term to refer to “the deep, enduring cultural patterns of a people,”²⁷ and in this way they were able to distinguish one period of history from another in terms of a people’s underlying structures of belief that give shape to all subsequent thinking.²⁸

James Orr (1844-1913) and Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) are most responsible for bringing the term into Christian academic circles.²⁹ Both Orr and Kuyper emphasized Christianity as a comprehensive vision for every sphere of life, the ability to see the world with new eyes, “guided by

24. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (N.p.: N.p., 1790).

25. Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 9.

26. Bartholomew and Goheen, *Living at the Crossroads*, 11-14; and David K. Naugle Jr., *Worldview: The History of a Concept* by (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 55-67.

27. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 14.

28. *Ibid.*, 16. Hiebert mentions the anthropological study of culture and the notion that “culture is not a random assortment of traits but an integrated coherent way of mentally organizing the world.”

29. Naugle, *Worldview*, 6-13, 16-25.

love, by an abiding desire to care about what God cares about—to rejoice in what makes God’s heart glad and to grieve about what saddens him.”³⁰

More recently the concept of worldview has been popularized by Christian thinkers and communicators, such as James Sire (“a set of pre-suppositions which we hold—consciously or unconsciously—about the world in which we live”),³¹ Charles Colson, and Nancy Pearcey.³² From the examples above, it seems clear that Christians who use the term *worldview* generally consider it as something that precedes philosophy. Their vision is of “a worldview yielding or being developed into a Christian philosophy;”³³ that is, a worldview provides the underlying and usually unconscious framework for further belief and action.

What a Worldview Is

In order to define “worldview” for our present purposes, it is best to start with the most basic, fundamental premise and then dig under the surface until we unearth additional elements that aid us in understanding the breadth and depth of the concept. At its most basic level, a worldview is the lens through which one sees the world. N. T. Wright defines a worldview as “the basic stuff of human existence, the lens through which the world is seen, the blueprint for how one should live in it, and above all the sense of identity and place which enables human beings to be what they are.”³⁴ Comparing a worldview to a lens reminds that most of us do not spend our time looking *at* the lens of our glasses, but rather looking *through* them. In a similar manner, we do not spend most of our time looking *at* our worldview, but rather *through* it, a fact that makes worldview analysis a

30. Richard Mouw, *Abraham Kuyper, A Short and Personal Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 92–93. Mouw gives his explanation of Kuyper’s idea of worldview, although he cautions that worldview is not something people “possess,” as in “having a worldview,” but rather is something people practice, as in “engaging in worldviewing.”

31. James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog* (5th ed.; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 16; and Sire’s *Naming the Elephant: Worldview as a Concept* (2nd ed.; IVP Academic, 2015).

32. Charles Bartholomew and Michael Goheen, *How Now Shall We Live?* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1998); Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004); and idem, *Finding Truth: 5 Principles for Unmasking Atheism, Secularism, and Other God Substitutes* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: David C. Cook, 2015).

33. Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen, *Christian Philosophy: A Systematic and Narrative Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic), 23; and Albert M. Wolters, “On the Idea of Worldview and Its Relation to Philosophy,” in *Stained Glass: Worldviews and Social Science*, ed. Paul Marshall et al. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983), 14–25. This view is in contrast to other models of conceiving the relationship between worldview and philosophy, in which a worldview might be the crowning achievement of building philosophy, or that worldview and philosophy repel each other.

34. Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 124.

difficult endeavor and the discernment of our own perspective a perennial challenge.³⁵

The illustration of a worldview as a lens is helpful, as long as we take care to not reduce a worldview to *seeing* alone. We can see above how Wright mentions a worldview's "blueprint for how one should live"; likewise, Brian Walsh and J. Richard Middleton caution against reducing a worldview to "a vision of life" that does not "lead a person or a people into a particular way of life."³⁶ Conduct is essential both in the outcome and in the understanding of worldview.

Describing a worldview is a way of giving voice to what we see or what others see—the perspective that we have adopted or the framework from which we interpret reality. Michael Goheen and Craig Bartholomew define the term as "an articulation of the basic beliefs embedded in a shared grand story that are rooted in a faith commitment and that give shape and direction to the whole of our individual and corporate lives."³⁷

This definition contains three significant points in relation to the present discussion. First, it locates these basic beliefs within a shared story, a narrative in which these beliefs make sense, and as we will see below, the storied structure of a worldview is important when considering how human beings interpret their existence in light of their surroundings. Second, this definition shows that a worldview story is rooted in a faith commitment. This reminds us that not only people of religious faith have a worldview but every person acts out of faith—including the secularist, the agnostic, or the atheist. We take the shared story by which we interpret our world, at least at some measure, by faith, even if we are not religious at all.³⁸ Third, this definition helps broaden a worldview beyond an individualistic interpretation by allowing "worldviews" to describe the corporate life of a society. As inherently social beings, we never develop a worldview in total isolation from others. The differences of our beliefs and practices bump up against one another to the point that we cannot help but be shaped by others' distinctive beliefs and to influence the beliefs of others.

35. Sire, *Naming the Elephant*, 143, states, "We think *with* our worldview and *because of* our worldview, not *about* our worldview." On a related note, it is usually when our perspective on the world has let us down in some way (either through cognitive dissonance or affective incoherence) that we question our foundational beliefs.

36. Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *Transforming Vision* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 54.

37. Bartholomew and Goheen, *Living at the Crossroads*, 23.

38. This understanding of a "faith commitment" severs the tie between "secularity" and "objectivity," as if religious adherence disqualifies itself by having a faith commitment.

Paul Hiebert approaches the concept of worldview from the standpoint of an anthropologist. He provides a social scientific definition of worldview, one which is confluent with that of Bartholomew and Goheen's but at the same time expands it as "the foundational cognitive, affective, and evaluative assumptions and frameworks a group of people makes about the nature of reality which they use to order their lives. It encompasses people's images or maps of the reality of all things that they use for living their lives. It is the cosmos thought to be true, desirable and moral by a community of people."³⁹ The three dimensions here are cognitive, affective, and evaluative.

Because the term *worldview* comes through philosophy, it could easily lend itself to an overemphasis on the cognitive aspects of worldview analysis (hence, the term *worldview thinking*). Hiebert points to the comprehensiveness of a worldview by his use of the terms "images" and "maps" that refer to our affections and moral decision making. Hiebert's definition focuses on "assumptions" and "frameworks"—the unconscious categories used to interpret our experiences.

The cognitive dimension refers to the way humans perceive the world around them. For example, do we view time in a linear fashion (from past to future) or in cyclical events? How do we view space? What are the mental maps we have of the world? Likewise, this dimension raises the issue of perception: does a person see oneself primarily in terms of individual autonomy or as connected to a group? Zoom out from the view of the individual, and we have another level of cognition related to how one views his or her "group" versus "other groups." Zoom out further, and we see issues regarding how one views this world and the forces in it. Do we see nature as mechanistic and natural? Or do we believe in the existence of supernatural forces that affect our lives? These are all examples of cognitive themes in a worldview.⁴⁰

The affective dimension refers to the kinds of personal emotions stirred up as we encounter the world around us. What produces joy or sorrow? What produces fear or revulsion? What elements inspire worship and create a sense of awe and wonder? How do we determine what is beautiful? Why do we create certain styles and find them attractive? Although not often treated in worldview studies, these themes are important for understanding the perspective of an individual or society.⁴¹

39. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 25-26.

40. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 50-59.

41. *Ibid.*

The “evaluative” or “moral” dimension relates to the judgments human beings make. What do we consider to be virtues worthy of emulation, standards worth keeping, morals worth modeling, or manners worth employing? These themes concern the moral order of the world. They help us understand why certain types or figures are consistently seen as heroes in literature and why other types are considered villains. These themes unconsciously form the way we view and value human achievements.⁴²

In studying worldviews, Hiebert recommends both a synchronic model (that helps one understand how people view the structure of the world) and a diachronic dimension (that helps one see how people interpret the human story).⁴³ This narrational aspect is crucial to understanding a worldview because it indicates how people view their history and their future, thus infusing the present with eschatological meaning. We will return to this aspect of a worldview when defining the term *eschatology*.

What a Worldview Does

We turn now to the question of a worldview’s *function*, not simply what it is but rather what it does. N. T. Wright’s understanding of worldview is consonant with Bartholomew, Goheen, and Hiebert and includes a helpful enumeration of four things a worldview accomplishes. First, worldviews provide the stories through which human beings view reality. Wright states, “Narrative is the most characteristic expression of worldview going deeper than the isolated observation or fragmented remark.”⁴⁴

Second, building upon this narrative, a worldview helps us answer “the basic questions that determine human existence.”⁴⁵ Walsh sees these questions as forming plausibility structures that reveal the assumptions behind the beliefs and actions that make sense.⁴⁶ Third, Wright points out that a worldview is expressed in cultural symbols⁴⁷ that reinforce the interpretive frameworks for a society and open the door to a worldview’s fourth

42. *Ibid.*, 60–65.

43. *Ibid.*, 25–28. Hiebert limits worldview to cultural analysis; hence, his emphasis on a “group of people,” not individuals. I am using worldview language in a more expansive way, referring to both culture and individual persons.

44. Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 123.

45. *Ibid.*

46. Brian J. Walsh, “From Housing to Homemaking: Worldviews and the Shaping of Home,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 35, no. 1 (2006): 237–57; and Sire, *Naming the Elephant*, 132–36.

47. Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 123.

function—the inclusion of “praxis, a way-of-being-in-the-world.”⁴⁸ Wright’s explanation of a worldview’s function centers primarily on giving answers to the basic questions of life, which, in turn, lead to a particular kind of involvement in the world. We will examine these worldview questions below, but first, we should consider an additional function of a worldview, as indicated by Paul Hiebert.

Not surprisingly, given Hiebert’s emphasis on affective and moral dimensions of a worldview, Hiebert sees “emotional security” as one of the primary gifts of a worldview. In a world of sorrow and loss, he writes, “People turn to their deepest cultural beliefs for comfort and security.” He then points to life’s most significant rituals (births, marriages, funerals, harvest celebrations, etc.) as evidence. He adds, “Our worldview buttresses our fundamental beliefs with emotional reinforcements so that they are not easily destroyed.”⁴⁹ This emotional security gives “psychological reassurance” as we view the world as it really is and protects us from a “worldview crisis” that erupts when our experience of reality differs starkly from our worldview.⁵⁰ The emotional underpinning of comfort and security in interpreting life through our worldview explains why a “worldview crisis” is rarely the result of a cognitive clash of logic alone.

Because our tendency is to turn to our worldview for psychological reassurance, we should be ever cautious about the way worldviews can be marshaled in support of idolatrous ideology. Oliver O’Donovan warns against mistaking the conception itself with false imaginations of the world. As an example, he mentions Christian appropriators of worldview terminology who so emphasized a “plurality of spheres of knowledge” that the result was a “civil conformity in the form of a political pluralism with which the sovereignty of Christ had little to do.”⁵¹ The danger here is seeing the function of a worldview in largely neutral terms, without recognizing that even its best-intentioned observers can succumb to its inherent, idolatrous bent.

48. *Ibid.*, 124; and Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 29. Hiebert concurs, “Our worldview validates our deepest cultural norms, which we use to evaluate our experiences and choose courses of action.”

49. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 29.

50. Paul G. Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts: Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 158, writes, “To question a worldview is to challenge the very foundation of life, and we resist such challenges with strong emotional reactions. Few human fears are greater than the fear of a loss of a sense of order and meaning.”

51. O’Donovan, *Finding and Seeking*, 112-13.

What a Worldview Asks

If one of the functions of a worldview is to provide answers to the basic questions of life, as seen above, we must now consider these questions and what they signify. N. T. Wright lays out four basic questions at the heart of a worldview: “Who are we?”⁵² “Where are we?” “What is wrong?”⁵³ and, “What is the solution?” That final question is what leads to praxis, as Wright insists, “The implied eschatology of the fourth question (‘what is the solution?’) necessarily entails *action*.”⁵⁴ Goheen and Bartholomew add “What is life all about?” and “In what kind of world do we live?” as additional, foundational questions prompted by the worldview story.⁵⁵ Asking this question another way, Mark Sanford and Steve Wilkens sum up the “problem” and “solution” questions by claiming that every worldview attempts to answer the question, “What must we do to be saved?”⁵⁶

In the decades since he listed four foundational worldview questions, Wright has come to see the value of a fifth question. He has decided to make the “implied eschatology” of the fourth question (“What is the solution?”) explicit. He writes, “Since writing *The New Testament and the People of God*, I have realized that ‘what time is it?’ needs adding to the four questions I started with (though at what point in the order could be discussed further). Without it, the structure collapses into the timelessness which characterizes some non-Judeo-Christian worldviews.”⁵⁷ For Wright, asking the question, “What time is it?” clarifies the shape of worldview thinking and keeps one from losing the important “this-world” dimension of

52. Some might add, “Where have we come from?” as a subset of the question “Who are we?” The reason debates over human origins continue to provoke such heated controversy in our day is because the existence or nonexistence of a personal Creator is a foundational plank in a person’s worldview. If humans have arrived here as the result of a purely naturalistic process, then the answers to “Who are we?” and “Where are we?” are radically altered.

53. The question regarding what is wrong with the world is closely linked to, What is the solution? For example, if the biggest problem in the world is ignorance, then the solution will be education. The reason some find “education” as a superficial answer to the world’s problems is because they believe “what has gone wrong” cannot be answered by appealing to ignorance.

54. Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 123.

55. Bartholomew and Goheen, *Living at the Crossroads*, 24. Sire, *Naming the Elephant*, 154-55. Sire’s worldview questions are arranged philosophically rather than narratively: (1) What is the prime reality—the really real? (2) What is the nature of external reality, that is, the world around us? (3) What is a human being? (4) What happens to a person at death? (5) Why is it possible to know anything at all? (6) How do we know what is right and wrong? (7) What is the meaning of human history? Sire sees his questions as comprehending the more story-based questions of Wright and others. I prefer to see Sire’s philosophical angle as a subset of the “worldview as master story” approach.

56. Wilkens and Sanford, *Hidden Worldviews*, 14.

57. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 2:443.

discipleship. This question situates people not only in the world—a place in space (“Where are we?”)—but also in a cultural moment—a place in time (“When are we?”). Just as humans cannot conceive of themselves apart from their geography and physicality, they cannot conceive of themselves as timeless beings.

If a worldview leads to praxis, a way of being in the world, then practice must inevitably be linked to moral deliberation that goes beyond mere rule keeping to include “discerning the time.” O’Donovan writes,

What is it, then, that the moral law cannot tell us? It cannot tell us what is to be done *next*. It gives generic forms by which we can understand the moment in which we find ourselves placed, but it does not tell us what time it is. It casts no light on the immediate horizon. And so it cannot formulate an agenda in which things that demand to be done can be ordered by their timeliness.⁵⁸

Therefore, the question “What must I do?” is closely connected to the preceding question, “What time is it?”

Much of this book will focus on Wright’s fifth worldview question, “What time is it?” Without this eschatological dimension we are unable to comprehend fully the contextual nature of our discipleship task. If the church is a sign and an instrument of the coming kingdom of God, then we cannot see our obedience as a timeless expression of God’s will. We are, instead, witnesses to a God who has done something in history, in this space-time universe, and who is moving all of humanity and the world to the ultimate fulfillment of his purposes. Understanding the times is vital if Christians believe we are witnessing to a God who has a plan for the future.

Criticisms and Cautions of Worldview

In recent days, certain scholars have questioned the helpfulness of the concept of “worldview.” Goheen and Bartholomew note several objections often made by such scholars and then offer a response to the objections. The first is that the worldview approach intellectualizes the gospel. While recognizing the dangers of modernism’s overemphasis on reason, Goheen and Bartholomew reaffirm the importance of “thinking Christianly,” and they believe they overcome this objection by showing how the Christian worldview is connected to one’s personal experience of Jesus Christ.

58. O’Donovan, *Finding and Seeking*, 216.

The affective elements of relationship are at the heart of a worldview, and because the starting point is God's revelation, not human reason, we cannot accept this criticism that a worldview is too dependent on human thought to be valid.⁵⁹

This charge of over-intellectualism is leveled against worldview thinking in another way. It is at the heart of James K. A. Smith's concern that worldview terminology focuses primarily on education as something one knows rather than something one loves.⁶⁰ Smith sees much Protestant discipleship as being overly fixated on doctrines and ideas, leading to "an overly intellectualist account of what it means to be or become a Christian," which in turn leads to "a stunted pedagogy that is fixated on the mind."⁶¹ Appealing to Augustine, Smith believes, "The way we inhabit the world is not primarily as thinkers, or even believers, but as more affective, embodied creatures who make our way in the world more by feeling our way around it."⁶²

How does this criticism influence an understanding of a Christian worldview? For Smith a worldview is no longer about distinctly Christian "knowledge" but rather about a Christian "social imaginary." It is "a distinctly Christian understanding of the world that is implicit in the practices of Christian worship."⁶³ The difference between a "social imaginary" and a "theory" is that the former emphasizes the way people's stories, narratives, myths, and icons capture their hearts and imaginations and thus form their view of the world. Instead of a trickle-down approach that begins with beliefs and then moves toward desires and actions, Smith sees the reverse taking place; human practices contribute to their imaginations, which then lead to the formation of knowledge of doctrines.⁶⁴ He adds, "What we do (practices) is intimately linked to what we desire (love), so what we do determines whether, how, and what we can know."⁶⁵

59. Bartholomew and Goheen, *Living at the Crossroads*, 19-21.

60. James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview and Cultural Formation (Cultural Liturgies)* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 18.

61. *Ibid.*, 42-43.

62. *Ibid.*, 47.

63. *Ibid.*, 68; and Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2007), 171-72. The term "social imaginary" comes from Taylor, who defines it as "the way ordinary people 'imagine' their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms, it is carried in images, stories, legends, etc." Smith uses "social imaginary" instead of "worldview" in order to capture the imaginative aspect more clearly.

64. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 69.

65. *Ibid.*, 70.

Smith's criticism of an approach to spiritual formation that is overly intellectualized is a helpful caution against focusing only on the cognitive aspect of worldview formation. However, as long as we remain fully aware of the "affective" and "moral" dimensions of a worldview, as noted by Hiebert and as affirmed by Wright in his consideration of cultural symbols as expressions of practice, then we should be able to avoid many of the dangers Smith mentions.⁶⁶ The best way to incorporate Smith's critique of the worldview approach is not to dismiss or downplay the cognitive element but to see how beliefs and practices work in a dialectic manner, with our social imaginary influencing what we can know and how we know it and our beliefs simultaneously impinging on our social imaginary and how we interpret the world around them. The reality is neither a trickle-down approach, like a river that rushes from knowledge to beliefs to practices; neither is it a trickle-up approach leading from practices to imagination to knowledge. Instead, we should view the relationship between the imagination and knowledge more like ocean waves, where the ocean thrusts water onto the shore (our practices) and the water that returns is taken up into the sea (our beliefs) and becomes part of the next wave (knowledge that now encompasses beliefs and practices).

Goheen and Bartholomew mention a second objection made by critics of the worldview approach: it might lead to relativizing the gospel. Confronted with a perplexing diversity of worldviews, we might begin to see truth as relative, since it seems impossible to adjudicate between competing worldview claims. On a similar note, does not the diversity of worldviews (and the specific nature of individual belief and practice) lead to incoherence when speaking of worldviews in general terms? If everyone has a worldview and every worldview is different, then how can one avoid reductionism when speaking of worldviews in general terms?

Goheen and Bartholomew answer the first aspect of this objection in two ways. First, they see the gospel as the true story of the world despite the plurality of perspectives that exist. Second, they believe one's articulation of worldview should not be confused with the gospel itself, but it is always

66. N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 4:28, n. 80. Contra Smith, I side with N. T. Wright who prefers to "expand the notion of worldview to incorporate these and other elements rather than abandon it and launch out with a different term."

open to critique from Scripture.⁶⁷ These responses help answer the objection of relativism.

James Sire responds to the second aspect of this objection, the idea that pluralism makes any general discussion of worldviews incoherent. Sire sees discussion of worldviews as “ideal types” that may not be held in the same way by every individual and yet still hold value in describing the general characteristics of that society. For example, within a Christian worldview, distinctions may be present between denominations—more or less consistent or coherent versions of seeing the world through a biblical lens, despite the differences that still exist. However, recognizing these differences do exist does not negate the helpfulness of generalizing worldview discussion as “ideal types,” just as one would not find it problematic to speak generally of a Hindu worldview, a naturalist worldview, and so forth.⁶⁸

A third objection is that “the worldview approach may become disconnected from Scripture and thus vulnerable to the spirits of the age.”⁶⁹ This objection is not a criticism per se but a warning against an ever-present danger. Perhaps in an attempt to ward off this danger, Oliver O’Donovan recommends the language of testimony and witness rather than a “worldview.” What is to be had here is “a message about the order of God’s works which we may both receive and give, a testimony to receive and amplify as it is passed through the thought and experience that is given to us to live with.” Furthermore, O’Donovan sees the language of “faithful repetition” as less vulnerable to the perils of idolatry, the idea of “extending or amplifying the testimony we have received.” The goal is for Christians to “in our time” take up the confession of those who have gone before them and then learn “to think and say for ourselves what has been thought and said before us on our behalf.”⁷⁰

Although O’Donovan’s cautions are helpful in reminding of the necessity of faithful witness to the apostolic testimony, as revealed in Scripture, they need not lead us to dispense with worldview terminology altogether. The answer to this warning is to heed it. If we are to embrace a worldview formed by the drama of Scripture, we must return again and again to the

67. Bartholomew and Goheen, *Living at the Crossroads*, 22.

68. Sire, *Naming the Elephant*, 131–32.

69. Bartholomew and Goheen, *Living at the Crossroads*, 22.

70. O’Donovan, *Finding and Seeking*, 137.

true story of our world in order to have our own blind spots exposed and mistaken ways corrected.⁷¹

Some criticisms of the use of worldview terminology are well founded, and we benefit from incorporating these warnings and concerns into our overall project. As long as we are clear on the affective and imaginative elements of worldview formation (as opposed to what is primarily a cognitive approach), the biblical drama as the true story of the world (as opposed to the relativizing tendencies of a pluralistic diversity of worldviews), and the need to be constantly immersed in Scripture (as opposed to extrabiblical or antibiblical visions of the world), then we can continue to use the idea of worldview as a way of helping to understand the interpretive framework from which people know, believe, and act in the world.

Eschatology

A third term that requires further reflection is *eschatology*. At the beginning of this chapter, we examined the term *discipleship* and showed that one important element of discipleship is that it includes a worldview. Then we examined the term *worldview* and showed that one of the questions a worldview seeks to answer is, “What time is it?” This worldview question leads to a consideration of eschatology, for no one can properly answer the question of what time it is without considering where he or she is in the narrative of world history and what the future is or should be.⁷²

If discipleship includes the mission of making more disciples, then the fulfillment of the Great Commission depends on faithful obedience to Christ in a particular place and time. Regarding *place*, most missionaries instinctively recognize that the shape of Christian obedience will change depending on the context in which that obedience is fulfilled. For example, a family in sub-Saharan Africa existing in impoverished conditions will have a Christian life of obedience that looks different from an underground

71. Bartholomew and Goheen, *Living at the Crossroads*, 22.

72. Sire, *Naming the Elephant*, 155. “What time is it?” is not the only eschatological question a worldview asks. Sire asks the worldview question, “What is the meaning of human history?” He makes clear that this question includes Wright’s “What time is it?” Orr poses a similar question, “What is the true end of existence?” Walsh and Middleton offer yet another, asking, “What master story ties my life to the lives of others living and dead?” I prefer “What time is it?” because it not only presupposes a meaning given to human history, but it directs our attention to what we do in the present in light of history’s ultimate significance.

church in China or a wealthy suburban businessman in south Florida.⁷³ We recognize that discipleship—following Jesus—will vary from place to place as different churches seek to follow Jesus in their context. Likewise, the methods of leading people to faith in Christ may vary depending on where they are and what is effective in a certain cultural milieu.⁷⁴ Geography matters, and even though there is an underlying unity in the gospel and what it demands of believers, the day-to-day vision of discipleship may appear different when the situation requires wisdom and discernment of how best to follow Jesus in areas not specifically spelled out in the Scriptures or in cultures where scriptural interpretation diverges.⁷⁵

If we recognize that geography shapes the form of one's Christian discipleship, why should we not also recognize that time does so as well? It is not just geography that shapes us but also our situatedness in a particular time. When we speak about "living on mission" in a particular place and time, it is not enough for us to consider *place* apart from *time*. As God's emissaries to a lost world, we are to understand our cultural "moment"—the time in which we have been put on earth.⁷⁶ To say that *time* matters for

73. Samuel Escobar, "Mission Studies—Past, Present, and Future," in *Landmark Essays in Mission and World Christianity* (ed. Robert L. Gallagher and Paul Hertig; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 243. Escobar explains how Christianity embraces the paradoxical dynamic of the gospel and pluralism. Christians believe in plurality in the sense that every culture is equal in terms of access to God, and at the same time, Christians believe no culture is adequate in presenting the transcendent truth. He writes, "The gospel does not find expression outside of a cultural form; however, the gospel cannot be restricted to any given cultural form—it transcends all of them."

74. David Clark, *To Know and Love God: Method for Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003), 78. Regarding our task of recognizing the differences in culture, Clark believes evangelicals should: (1) "recognize the reality of cultural influence on all theological interpretation," (2) "purposefully adopt a self-critical stance toward any and all cultures," while (3) asserting "the need for theology to achieve cultural relevance," and (4) yielding "to the priority of Scripture over any and all cultural assumptions."

75. Timothy Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think about and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 12. When it comes to exercising this discernment, Tennent contrasts the universal truth of Christianity (the "pilgrim principle") with the particular force of the gospel in a culture (the "indigenizing" principle) and recommends a healthy balance between the two. Tennent writes, "An undue emphasis on the pilgrim principle assumes that all the issues we face in our culture are the same faced by every culture. In other words, our own theological reflection is universalized for the entire world. Because our issues must surely be the same as theirs, and we are confident in our own theological and exegetical abilities, there is no point in humbly listening to the insights of Christians outside of our cultural sphere. By contrast, an undue emphasis on the indigenizing principle assumes that every issue the church faces is, in the final analysis, so contextualized and conditioned by the particularities of the local setting and the time in which we live that we become skeptical of the ability of any theologian to speak with authority or confidence about the claims of the gospel on someone outside his or her own cultural arena."

76. Michael Goheen, *Introducing Christian Mission Today: Scripture, History, and Issues* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 27). Goheen claims, "The church's mission is always contextual. The church must always ascertain what the issues of the day are and address those. Missiology must remain rooted in the gospel and the Word of God. But it also must address the times and places in which it lives. Thus missiology will vary from place to place and time to time" (emphasis in original).

our mission is one way of saying that our conception of discipleship itself, which is both the result and the process of mission, is thoroughly eschatological. To make this case, I must explain what I mean by “eschatology.”

A General Definition of *Eschatology*

Generally speaking, eschatology is not a distinctively Christian concept; that is, people who adhere to other religious faiths or no religious faith at all still maintain a vision for humanity’s future, and this vision is part of the narrative that gives them meaning and significance. German theologian Hans Schwarz defines the term broadly enough to encompass multiple religious perspectives when he writes,

In its broadest sense the term “eschatology” includes all concepts of life beyond death and everything connected with it such as heaven and hell, paradise and immortality, resurrection and transmigration of the soul, rebirth and reincarnation, and last judgment and doomsday. Eschatology also is determined by and determines our understanding of humanity, of body and soul, and of value systems and worldviews.⁷⁷

Note how there is nothing particularly Christian about this definition since multiple religious perspectives are included here. Similar to the way the term *worldview* can apply to Christianity or to other religions (for example, “the Hindu worldview”), eschatology can also apply to other belief systems and visions of the future. Even those without religious faith have an eschatological viewpoint. For example, the committed naturalist may believe that the physical universe is in a state of entropy and will eventually lead to the dissolution of the planet and all humanity. This perspective is eschatological (albeit a pessimistic one!), but it plays an important role in one’s thought. Schwarz continues,

Eschatology always influences and determines the conduct of life and vice versa. In an individual eschatology the conduct of this life will determine the destiny of the individual after death, whereas in a collective eschatology the destiny of all humanity is taken into consideration. A cosmic eschatology even goes beyond

⁷⁷. Hans Schwarz, *Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 26.

the scope of humanity and includes the destiny of this earth or of the whole cosmos.⁷⁸

The three elements of eschatology here are personal, collective, and cosmic. In most worldviews, these three are held together like different plot points in the overarching story people believe about humankind.⁷⁹ Not only are these elements operative in the work of Christian and non-Christian religious scholars, but they also are operative in scholars who are not religious at all. Take, for example, Julian Barnes, the British novelist who has written a popular memoir on death. Barnes is an atheist whose *cosmic* eschatology is that the world is doomed to eventual destruction, and thus, his *collective* eschatology is that all humanity will perish with it, so his *personal* eschatology is that no hope exists for life after death.⁸⁰

It would be inconceivable for Barnes to believe in a personal afterlife with God while simultaneously arguing that the story of humanity ends with the universe and all the people in it ceasing to exist. These three elements of his vision of the future naturally hold together and help us see that, although Barnes is not religious at all, he adopts an eschatological position as part of his overarching story of humankind. Within the framework of this overarching story, we make decisions based on the kind of world we believe we inhabit. For this reason O'Donovan reminds us, "Narrative is an important condition for moral thought."⁸¹ The understanding of a narrative is what distinguishes merely "doing something" from "how one thinks what one is to do."

The reason we must first consider eschatology in its broadest sense, even without its distinctively Christian contours, is so we can later contrast Christian eschatology with rival eschatological perspectives. However, since we are also affixing "eschatological" as a modifier for "discipleship,"

78. Ibid.

79. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 178. Newbigin warns against reducing eschatology to only one of these elements—in this case, the personal. He writes, "The question we have to ask is not, 'What will happen to this person's soul after death?' but 'What is the end, which gives meaning to this person's story as part of God's whole story?'"

80. Julian Barnes, *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 242; and James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 5–6. Barnes writes hauntingly about a person's inevitable death and eventual irrelevance ("just as every writer will have a last reader, so every corpse will have a last visitor") as part of the collective demise of humanity on a planet doomed to eventual destruction. James K. A. Smith notes how Barnes's meditations on death and extinction lead him to questions about God and divinity.

81. Oliver O'Donovan, *Self, World, and Time: Ethics as Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 1:3.

it is important that we define the distinctively Christian understanding of humanity's future.

The Christian Understanding of Eschatology

Many Christians assume that discussion of eschatology refers to the “last things” doctrines in the back of systematic theology textbooks. These doctrines generally refer to the second coming of Christ, the timing and interpretation of the millennium, and the future, final state of humanity. In this book we will be using *eschatology* in a broader sense, as encompassing the Christian vision of time and the destiny of the world. Therefore, to say discipleship is eschatological is not to say that discipleship is caught up in debates about the time line of events surrounding Christ's second coming but to say that discipleship is grounded in the larger story of the world and where the world is going, as articulated in Scripture.⁸²

In fact, viewing eschatology as only the “end times” is derivative, according to Dermot Lane, because it comes from “the broader and more biblical understanding of eschatology which is founded on the Christ-event: the announcement of the coming reign of God, the public ministry of Jesus, and the outpouring of the Spirit. This primary meaning of eschatology should be the basis of any particular understanding of death, judgment, heaven, hell and the second coming.”⁸³ In other words, we derive our understanding of the end times from the larger story of salvation, not as an isolated appendix of doctrines clustered around “the future.” We now turn our attention to this larger story of salvation, the story of God's work in world history, the coming of Christ, and the promise of his return.

Christian Eschatology as the Story of World History. Perhaps no one has emphasized the eschatological nature of Christian theology in recent centuries more than Jürgen Moltmann. In his monumental *Theology of*

82. In broadening my definition of eschatology, I hope to include various perspectives on the end times within an overarching framework of God's ultimate promise. In the past century the prominence of dispensational thought within evangelical circles sought to make particular prophecies relevant for Christian behavior, with urgency around evangelism in light of Christ's imminent return. But it would be a mistake to label all dispensationalists as pessimistic in cultural outlook. B. M. Pietsch's important work, *Dispensational Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), shows an “afflictive model of progress” at work, in which the present is getting better and worse at the same time, with ultimate hope in the rule of Christ on earth (158). Although I recognize that different millennial views will impact a Christian's perspective of future hope, I believe a detailed treatment of specific eschatological beliefs would lead beyond the main thesis for this book. For this reason I will focus on eschatology as a general understanding of the Christian vision of time and the ultimate destiny of the world.

83. Dermot A. Lane, “Eschatology,” in *New Dictionary of Theology* (ed. Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins, and Dermot A. Lane; Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1987), 329–42.

Hope, Moltmann argues that only in the presence of a certain worldview, a “confidence and a hope for the world,” will Christian mission be truly transformative.⁸⁴ Moltmann sees eschatology not as the end itself but as the entire course of history in its movement toward the end. He writes, “The eschatological is not one element of Christianity, but it is the medium of Christian faith. . . . Hence eschatology cannot really be only a part of Christian doctrine. Rather, the eschatological outlook is characteristic of all Christian proclamation, of every Christian experience and of the whole earth.”⁸⁵

Moltmann is not alone in his broader conception of eschatology and its centrality within the Christian story. For example, Trevor Hart shows how the eschatological time line of humanity’s future reaches back into the present and the past when he states,

Eschatology concerns the fact that, just as God spoke the primordial word which called the world into being, so too he will have the final say about its future, a word that he has already uttered under the form of promise. While, therefore, eschatological doctrine certainly has to do with final destinies—of individual people, human history, and the cosmos as a whole—beyond the threshold of finitude and death, in a vital sense it is not just about the “end” (the final few pages) of the world’s story, but about the story as a whole (past, present, and future) and as

84. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 288–89.

85. *Ibid.*, 16; and Scaer, “Jürgen Moltmann and His Theology of Hope,” 69–79. No doubt exists that Moltmann has strong justification in Scripture for his emphasis on eschatology, and even his critics commend him for resurfacing this often-neglected element of missiology and ecclesiology (*ibid.*, 69). The problem with this theology of hope is that Moltmann, at times, overstates his case to the point that God appears to be subject to the process of time and not outside of it. The result is a biblical-sounding version of process theology. For a healthy critique of Moltmann’s proposal, see *ibid.* Additionally, Oliver O’Donovan credits Moltmann for bringing the distinctiveness of hope into view but claims “his exposition of hope has been bipolar” because of the way it insists on intrinsic possibilities, while also promoting an ethico-political program. He writes, “Hope does not and cannot ground the program Moltmann elicits from it.” O’Donovan, *Finding and Seeking*, 163–65. Pentecostal theologian Simon Chan appreciates Moltmann’s emphasis on eschatology, but he argues against Moltmann’s tendency to “free” the Spirit from his ecclesial location and release him into the world. Chan makes the case for a unique working of the Spirit in the church, writing, “Not only is the church Spirit-filled, but the church is also the place where the Spirit is present on earth.” Simon Chan, *Pentecostal Theology and the Christian Spiritual Tradition* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 110–11. Missionary and theologian Lesslie Newbigin manages to make many of the same points as Moltmann yet without the problems of process theology. In this dissertation, wherever I quote from Moltmann, it is to affirm his theological and biblical reflection where he is helpful and should not be interpreted as advocacy for his overall theological project.

individual parts of it read now consistently in the light of that promised end.⁸⁶

Similarly, Karl Barth grounded eschatological hope in Christology, arguing that “Christianity that is not entirely and altogether eschatological has entirely nothing to do with Christ.”⁸⁷ Likewise, Stanley Hauerwas claims that “every loci of the Christian faith has an eschatological dimension, making impossible any isolated account of eschatology.”⁸⁸ Seen in this light, eschatology functions as something of an umbrella that encompasses all of Christianity and its doctrines. To put it another way, eschatology refers to the story line as it moves to its climax and culmination; it is the element that drives the plot forward to the promised resolution.

Christian Eschatology and the Coming of Christ. Why is it not only possible but also necessary to see eschatology in this broader sense? Perhaps it is because the gospel infuses time with redemptive significance. The reason eschatology matters for understanding Christianity is the same reason geography and physicality matter for understanding Christianity; Jesus entered this world in a particular place *and* time.

Theologians write about the miracle of the incarnation—the reality of God the Son taking on human flesh and dwelling among humanity. The terminology of incarnation refers to God’s *enfleshment*. Though it may not receive the same amount of attention, *temporality*—just as much as *embodiment*—is at the heart of this spectacular miracle. Timothy George reflects, “At the heart of the Christian faith is this stupendous claim, that the eternal God of creation, the God who *is* eternity . . . has so opened himself to our creaturely existence, to our history, to our time, that he has come among us as one of us.” George recommends we recognize this truth not only is the incarnation but also “the Intemporation.” He continues, “In Jesus Christ, God in his own being—and not as a surrogate—has come into our own world *and also into our own time*, and in doing so he has taken unto himself our hurt, our pain, and indeed our sin.”⁸⁹

86. Trevor Hart, “Eschatology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology* (ed. Gerald R. McDermott; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 262–75.

87. Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (London, UK: Oxford University Press, 1933), 314.

88. Stanley Hauerwas, *Approaching the End: Eschatological Reflections on Church, Politics, and Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), xii.

89. Timothy George, “St. Augustine and the Mystery of Time,” in *What God Knows: Time and the Question of Divine Knowledge* (ed. Harry Lee Poe and J. Stanley Mattson; Waco: Baylor, 2005), 40.

Because the incarnation is just as much about the Son of God entering time as it is his entering humanity's space, we should not be surprised to see the theme of "fulfilling the times" running throughout the scriptural story line, primarily in reference to Christ's coming.⁹⁰ According to O'Donovan, this theme "summons us to bring our different historical moments into relation with a focal community of obedience evoked by that moment."⁹¹ In other words, we read our own history and interpret our present moment in light of the times being fulfilled in Christ.

The events that make up the heart of the Christian understanding of eschatology are not, in the first place, the return of Christ and his judgment of all things but the cross and resurrection. The crucifixion is not a metaphor; neither is it an appeal to a timeless ethos of forgiveness and love. Instead, the crucifixion is a moment of time that tears history in two and gives it "meaning, a direction that it never had before."⁹² Likewise, to speak of the resurrection as the "center of history" (as does O'Donovan) is to elevate this event from being "a mere extent of time" and to see it, instead, as "the narrative logic that underpins whatever has been undertaken or will be undertaken in time,"⁹³ or as Newbigin put it memorably, "The resurrection cannot be accommodated in any way of understanding the world except one of which it is the starting point."⁹⁴ The cross and resurrection are the climactic point in the story of the world, not simply because of their place in the biblical time line but also in how they impact our reading of history before and after. The apostolic testimony to the truth of the cross and resurrection, therefore, "renarrates the whole of human life" so that one sees the world in light of God's action in the person and work of Jesus Christ.⁹⁵

Christian Eschatology and the Return of Christ. Broadening the Christian understanding of eschatology beyond "end times" doctrines must not exclude these future events. The return of Christ and final judgment are key moments in the future that infuse our present choices with significance and purpose. As O'Donovan writes, "At the heart of eschatology is the promise that we all must appear before God to be judged according to our works.

90. Mark 1:15; Luke 1:1; 1:20; 21:24; and 24:44; Acts 1:6; 3:18, 20; and 13:33; Gal 4:4; Eph 1:10; and 1 Pet 1:20.

91. O'Donovan, *Finding and Seeking*, 116.

92. George, "St. Augustine and the Mystery of Time," 43.

93. O'Donovan, *Self, World, and Time*, 92.

94. Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth*, Osterhaven Lecture (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 11.

95. Hauerwas, *Approaching the End*, 53.

Our deeds are to be events in history, subject to ultimate appraisal.⁹⁶ The three elements of eschatology (personal, collective, and cosmic) find their Christian particularity in this place. *Personal* eschatology refers to our hope of eternal life with God that will outlast physical death. *Collective* eschatology refers to our hope in a bodily resurrection and our unending fellowship with God and one another. *Cosmic* eschatology refers to the regeneration of the universe and the establishment of the new heavens and new earth.

Once we consider Christian eschatology in its personal, collective, and cosmic conceptions, we see how it shapes our decisions in the here and now. N. T. Wright sees our present behavior as shaped by the ultimate goal for humanity. If the goal is the new heaven and new earth (“with human beings raised from the dead to be the renewed world’s rulers and priests”),⁹⁷ and if the goal is achieved through God’s work through Jesus and the Spirit, then “Christian living in the present consists of anticipating this ultimate reality through the Spirit-led, habit-forming, truly human practice of faith, hope, and love, sustaining Christians in their calling to worship and reflect his glory into the world.”⁹⁸ Christians live today in light of the future, as people who trust in the promises of God and anticipate the return of Christ. Christian obedience, therefore, is grounded not merely in what God has done but also in what God will do.

Eschatology and the Worldview Question, “What Time Is It?”

As we consider a definition of *eschatology*, we must give more attention to the worldview question mentioned in the earlier section, “What time is it?” This question leads us not merely to reflect on the nature of time and its significance but also what we are to *do* in light of the time we have and the time in which we live.

How does our obedience work out in time? For that matter, what is time, and how do we see ourselves situated in it? For Augustine the Christian perspective on time is “a way of coming before God and offering our lives to him as a form of faith seeking understanding, leading toward vision.”⁹⁹ Time is “ecotonic”—always fluid, insecure, and “midway between the vanished past and the unknown future.”¹⁰⁰ The term he uses—*distentio*

96. O’Donovan, *Self, World, and Time*, 130.

97. N. T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 67.

98. *Ibid.*

99. George, “St. Augustine and the Mystery of Time,” 31.

100. *Ibid.*

animi—refers to time as “a distension of the mind or the soul,” where three realities are in the mind: (1) the past (in memory), (2) the present (in attention), and (3) the future (in expectation).¹⁰¹

O’Donovan recognizes the innate difficulty of comprehending the meaning of “the present time.” He writes, “What the present cannot be is a *period* of time, with dimensions and extension. As soon as we sandwich it in between past and future, it disappears into nothingness. . . . We find ourselves like salmon leaping in the stream, the present being our point of purchase on our upstream journey, *disposing* of the past and *appropriating* the future.”¹⁰²

This difficulty of the conceiving of time, particularly in the relationship of the past and future to the present, does not mean that we reduce time to mind games. One could interpret Augustine’s claim, “It is in you, O mind of mine, that I measure the periods of time. Do not shout me down that it exists [objectively]; do not overwhelm yourself with the turbulent flood of your impressions”¹⁰³ as if he were making time *merely* a matter of the mind, but this would be to confuse his emphasis on *measuring* time with *time* as it truly is. The measurement of time is indeed a mental activity, but time itself is something that exists outside the mind, something created by God (the “eternal Creator of all times”). Augustine’s point in emphasizing the tension and strain is, rather, “to show us that time is never at our disposal. It is never ours to claim and control and command.”¹⁰⁴ It is another way of showing how humanity’s restless hearts will not find healing in the passing of time but in the God who is beyond the time he has created.

Living in the Present as People of the Future. As Christians who see time as a gift from God, we must see ourselves as people who inhabit a particular place and occupy a specific time *for a purpose*. Therefore, the question “What time is it?” cannot linger in philosophical and theological reflection but must move toward action as we seek to walk in obedience. “What time is it?” draws a line from eschatology to ethics. It moves from the question of timing to the question, “What do we do in light of what time it is?” The action question presupposes the temporal reality.

Christian ethics are grounded in eschatology and ecclesiology. The grand narrative of the Bible not only shows us what the future is but marks

101. Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 269.

102. O’Donovan, *Self, World, and Time*, 15.

103. Augustine, *Confessions*, 277–80.

104. George, “St. Augustine and the Mystery of Time,” 36.

us out as a people belonging to that future. We not only *know* the ultimate future of the world, but we also *embody* that future.¹⁰⁵ Eschatological discipleship intends to help “disciples learn how to interpret everyday experience eschatologically.”¹⁰⁶ We see the world through the eyes of faith, through the testimony of Scripture, and then we fulfill our particular roles within that overarching story. Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon are right when they claim, “We can only act within that world which we see,” which means the ethical question Christians should ask is not simply, “What ought I now to do?” but first, “How does the world really look?”¹⁰⁷

On a similar note Alasdair MacIntyre asserts, “I can only answer the question, ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question, ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’”¹⁰⁸ Christian obedience takes place within a narrative of history. Asking, “What time is it?” leads to an eschatological interpretation of everyday decisions based on the future promise of God and our belonging to the people of that promise.

Embracing an eschatological understanding of redemption leads us to ask, “What time is it?” in order to ground our efforts at disciple making within the cosmic story of God’s plan for the universe. Goheen and Bartholomew define our task, insisting, “Following Jesus, we are called to make known God’s rule over all of human life, embodying it in our lives, demonstrating it in our actions, and announcing it with our words.”¹⁰⁹ Making known God’s rule and obeying Christ in our daily lives is inevitably contextual. This work will appear different from culture to culture, even from person to person.¹¹⁰ For this reason Goheen and Bartholomew rely on John Stott’s concept of “double listening,” whereby believers keep one ear

105. Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York: HarperOne, 1996), 198. Hays notes, “The church embodies the power of the resurrection in the midst of a not-yet-redeemed world.” Additionally, he uses this memorable image when he writes, “The church community is God’s eschatological beachhead, the place where the power of God has invaded the world.” *Ibid.*, 27.

106. Vanhoozer, *Faith Speaking Understanding*, 45.

107. Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 88.

108. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (3rd ed.; Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 216; and James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works (Cultural Liturgies)* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 108. On a similar note, James K. A. Smith claims “narrative is the scaffolding of our experience.”

109. Bartholomew and Goheen, *Living at the Crossroads*, 60.

110. Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology: A Systematic Study of the Christian Life* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1998), 96. Chan sees a dialectical relationship between Christian virtue and cultural values. Chan says, “While cultural values shape the way Christian virtues are expressed, Christian virtues, as a coherent pattern of living out the Christian story, must challenge values that contradict the Christian story. Only in maintaining this dialectic can the Christian be theologically and culturally authentic.”

listening carefully to Scripture and Christian tradition and the other ear listening to the surrounding culture.¹¹¹ Though Stott does not ask the specific question of “What time is it?” his concept of double listening implies it.

Goheen and Bartholomew explain why the worldview question of eschatology matters for our mission when they observe, “Failure to know what time it is in our culture will render us unable to discern the crossroads at which we are called to live for Christ. Such failure may well betray us into accepting, however unintentionally, the idols of contemporary culture.”¹¹² Knowing what time it is in our culture is a crucial aspect of being a disciple of Jesus Christ, for only in this manner will we be able to show forth a way of life and holiness that confronts the prevailing idolatries of our age.

Where does this eschatological worldview question leave us? It leaves us with a clear sense of who we are, where we are, and *when* we are. O’Donovan states, “In outline we may suggest that the opportune time is a time *in the world*, when the act will correspond truthfully to the conditions that obtain; it is a time *for the agent*, who may realize him—or herself according to God’s calling; it is a time *of the future*, which opens a way to the realization of God’s purposes.”¹¹³

Biblical eschatology—the time line of Scripture climaxing with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and moving inexorably toward his return—is what grounds and informs ethical choices, but those choices are not made clear by eschatology alone. Asking, “What time is it?” is the precursor to wisdom and deliberation, a way of discerning the current moment in light of one’s past, present, and future. Cognitive knowledge of the world’s future is not all that is necessary for eschatological discipleship. What we also need is wisdom, and that leads us to the fourth and final term we must define.

Wisdom

Discerning the answer to the worldview question, “What time is it?” requires wisdom and deliberation. The missionary task of the follower of Christ is to receive the apostolic testimony and then faithfully transmit it into a new time and place, to a generation that will once again pass it along to the next. This transmission requires great wisdom.

111. John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian: Applying God’s Word to Today’s World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 24–29.

112. Bartholomew and Goheen, *Living at the Crossroads*, 108.

113. O’Donovan, *Finding and Seeking*, 147.

Recent years have brought a renewal of wisdom studies in contemporary theology. In the field of systematic theology, for example, David Ford has written an entire monograph on wisdom.¹¹⁴ In the field of biblical studies, Bartholomew has taken up the subject.¹¹⁵ Meanwhile, as seen below, scholars such as N. T. Wright, Oliver O'Donovan, and Kevin Vanhoozer frequently speak of wisdom as integral to Christian living. Benefiting from these recent studies on wisdom, we will seek to define the term biblically, show its importance for the Christian life, and how the Spirit's guidance relates to Christian discernment.

Living according to God's Good World

What is wisdom? According to Craig Bartholomew, wisdom is about “the paths that lead to life, shalom (peace) and flourishing”;¹¹⁶ it refers to “a very wide range of desires, behaviors, skills and beliefs—all of which, like the spokes of a wheel, find their hub in the order God has created into our world.”¹¹⁷ In this sense “wisdom teaching” refers to instruction that puts believers in a position to live in harmony with nature and events.¹¹⁸ Wisdom is not something we create but something we discover. It is coming to terms with reality and then adjusting our lives accordingly. Goheen and Bartholomew draw on this historic definition in their discussion of wisdom when they write, “Wisdom is the discovery of the order of creation found in both nature and society, and it implies a willingness to live in conformity with that order as it is discovered. God's wisdom is manifested in the order that he has established in the creation; true human wisdom is manifested in recognizing and conforming to that order.”¹¹⁹

On a similar note, O'Donovan draws on the portrait of wisdom as a “master workman” (Prov 8:22, 30 ESV) to explain wisdom's purpose. He states, “What wisdom demands is a response to the goodness of God's world, which is to say, to know it and to love it, to realize ourselves in engagement with it.” O'Donovan's definition of wisdom pushes beyond Goheen and Bartholomew's idea of living in light of the created order.

114. David F. Ford, *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

115. Craig Bartholomew and Ryan O'Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature: An Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011).

116. *Ibid.*, 19.

117. *Ibid.*, 24.

118. O'Donovan, *Self, World, and Time*, 60.

119. Bartholomew and Goheen, *Living at the Crossroads*, 39.

O'Donovan sees wisdom as not something we employ when needed but something that employs us. It makes a demand on people; it requires a "reflective and critical relation to knowledge, exercised in judging what this or that item of knowledge is worth, how it is contextualized among other items, and what it licenses us to conclude and what it does not."¹²⁰ Putting O'Donovan's insight together with Goheen and Bartholomew's definition, we conclude that, because wisdom concerns living in harmony with the truth of God's good world, wisdom is something to which we submit as we seek to live faithfully with discernment.

Wisdom Lived Out in Time

Wisdom not only considers *what* we are in this world but *when* we are as people who inhabit this world. Living in harmony with God's created order means we must put our faith into practice in particular times and places. Kevin Vanhoozer focuses attention on practice when he distinguishes between wisdom and knowledge by claiming, "Disciples need more than knowing *that* (knowledge); they need to know *how* to live out their knowledge of Jesus Christ (wisdom). Wisdom is lived knowledge, the ability to transpose what we know here to that problem over there." According to Vanhoozer's metaphor of a drama, to have doctrinal wisdom is to see oneself on the stage and instinctively "know what to say and do in order to advance the main action of the play, and to do so in a contextually fitting way that effectively communicates to others."¹²¹ Wisdom, therefore, means understanding the story we are part of and what temporal place we occupy in the unfolding of that story and then living accordingly.

Vanhoozer's distinction between "knowledge" and "lived knowledge" is helpful in that it includes the element of moral discernment and judgment. For Christians who view the Bible as a rulebook, offering timeless wisdom for life and a series of commands to obey, holiness turns into a timeless moral code that brings reward from God and earns his favor, or a moral code followed out of gratitude for being saved by God's grace. Either way we conceive of holiness as following a moral code that is universal for all Christians.

The problem with this view is that many moments in our lives do not require obedience at the basic level of discerning God's commandments

120. O'Donovan, *Finding and Seeking*, 48.

121. Vanhoozer, *Faith Speaking Understanding*, 204-5.

(for example, the Decalogue) but rather a deeper, more fundamental obedience that requires wisdom and discernment in understanding the times and acting accordingly. Simon Chan defines *discernment* this way:

Discernment is knowing God's will in particular situations. And knowing God's will, as we learned earlier, is not just a matter of grasping a piece of information. It has to do with our whole attitude toward God and ourselves, with an ongoing relationship with God and loving him. Discernment, therefore, is more than just the scientific application of principles to particular situations. It requires practical wisdom that no amount of formal study can impart, that is, a kind of spiritual sensitivity that comes with long experience.¹²²

Discernment is on display when, before we can answer the question, "What am I to do?," we ask the question, "What am I to do *in this state of affairs?*,"¹²³ which is another way of asking the question, "What time is it?"

Eschatological discipleship, then, is not a timeless moral code but rather a timely application of moral wisdom that is cultivated through growth in Christian character, immersion in the grand narrative unfolded in the Scriptures, and reliance on the Spirit's guidance. Included in this search for moral wisdom is a sense of urgency. For this reason David Ford is correct to link the pursuit of wisdom to the discernment of cries—both cries of blessing as well as warning when he writes, "Discernment of cries and crying out with discernment are near to the heart of the meaning of a prophetic wisdom that is involved in history and oriented to God and God's future."¹²⁴ This pursuit of wisdom is grounded in a desire to see God's ultimate purposes come to fruition.¹²⁵

Although wisdom transcends time (because it is what we need in whatever epoch we find ourselves), it is cultivated and applied *in* time. Wisdom draws on the resources of the past, looks to the promise of the future, and

122. Chan, *Spiritual Theology*, 201.

123. O'Donovan, *Self, World, and Time*, 32.

124. Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, 19.

125. *Ibid.*, 50. Ford states, "Desire is in many ways the embracing mood of a life immersed in history and oriented towards the fulfillment of God's purposes."

relies on the Spirit's guidance in the present.¹²⁶ O'Donovan says, "The disciple is a figure who identifies with more than one time and place: a time and place to inhabit, another time and place to be centered upon." The disciple

has recognized a time and place in history, there and not elsewhere, then and not before or after, where the possibility of wisdom was decisively given. In understanding *this* moment in relation to *that* moment, in finding in *that* moment the key to *this* moment's meaning and purpose, the disciple has overcome what was most threatening and destructive about historical relations, their contingency and moral arbitrariness.¹²⁷

O'Donovan's insight is key to eschatological discipleship; our actions in the current moment find their significance because of God's salvific events in the past and eschatological promises of the future.

Wisdom and the Spirit

Before moving on from this definition, we must reiterate the importance of the Spirit's guidance when it comes to moral decision making in light of "what time it is."¹²⁸ Life in the Spirit should not be contrasted with a contextually aware, morally discerning knowledge, as if the Spirit's guidance must always be spontaneous and surprising, rather than the result of reflection and depth. O'Donovan is correct to view life in the Spirit as "a condition of moral *maturity*," and he defines maturity as understanding the order and destiny of the world and then distinguishing certain elements of moral experience (norms, goods, demands of other people) until a discernment of God's will occurs. He observes, "The maturity of the believer is set against the background of a world-historical narrative of new creation through the Son of God, a story of a once-for-all recovery of humankind that reaches its crisis in Christ's death and resurrection."¹²⁹

Once again we see the connection between the wise course of action today and the salvific moment in the past. To follow Christ under the

126. N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 124. Wright notes that the first thing to know about the Spirit is that he "is given to begin the work of making God's future real in the present," so that we can learn "to live with the life, and by the rules, of God's future world, even as we are continuing to live within the present one."

127. O'Donovan, *Finding and Seeking*, 118.

128. Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, 192. David Ford writes, "Learning to live in the Spirit is the encompassing activity of Christian discipleship after Pentecost."

129. O'Donovan, *Finding and Seeking*, 9.

guidance of the Spirit, relying on wisdom in reading the times, and acting accordingly is to speak, to offer “a meaningful and contoured account of what it is to live, here in this place and time, under the guidance of the Spirit which the ascended Christ poured out upon His followers.”¹³⁰ As disciples, we do not simply ask the question, “What would Jesus do?” as Charles Sheldon famously recommended.¹³¹ We must ask the deeper and richer questions, “What would Jesus have me to do in this state of affairs? What time is it? What is God calling us to do in this time?”¹³²

An element of improvisation is necessary in our walk with Christ, something Vanhoozer dubs “improvisatory wisdom”—a way of continuing obedience “in the *same* way, but *differently*.” Returning to his metaphor of a play, he writes, “The company of faith plays the same drama, but in ten thousand different places, each with its own particular social setting and cultural scenery.”¹³³ Likewise, Brian Walsh and Sylvia Keesmaat speak of “imaginative improvisation” that is, nevertheless, “so deeply immersed in the text, and so completely absorbed in the story, that our imaginations are transformed and liberated by the vision the story sets before us.”¹³⁴ However, the Spirit empowers our improvisatory performance—the Spirit who is “a gift of the end time” that brings the future into the present, giving the “life of the new creation” to God’s people.¹³⁵

An additional reason for relying on the Spirit’s guidance in the application of wisdom is that the moment of decision is not always up for

130. *Ibid.*, 139.

131. Charles Sheldon, *In His Steps* (Greensboro, NC: Empire Books, 2012).

132. Chan, *Spiritual Theology*, 208. My use of the plural “us” is intentional here. It is not the individual believer who, on his or her own, must discern the way forward but is, instead, a communal process. Simon Chan is correct when he writes, “Discernment . . . is ultimately a communal undertaking, based not on some private revelation that gives us access to privileged information about ourselves, others and the world but on the corporate reality that shapes our identity. In short, the church is the locus of all discernment because God’s will is truly revealed there.”

133. Vanhoozer, *Faith Speaking Understanding*, 201; and Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, 202. This focus on improvisation should not be used as an excuse to take a sharply different direction than what the wisdom of the past or the historic tradition of the church has countenanced. David Ford recommends believers “be open to surprises on the scale of resurrection from the dead or Peter’s baptism of Cornelius” as one of the ways we learn to live in the Spirit and exercise wisdom. I worry, however, that appeals to the Spirit’s “surprising” moves can be used to downplay or deny the authority of Scripture on controversial matters, thus pitting the Spirit against Scripture or tradition.

134. Brian J. Walsh and Sylvia C. Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 134.

135. Goheen, *Introducing Christian Mission Today*, 77; and Justo L. González, *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990), 163. Similarly, González defines genuine spirituality as based in the presence of the Holy Spirit who directs believers to the future when he states, “To have the Spirit is to have a foot up on the stirrup of the eschatological future and to live now as those who expect a new reality, the coming of the Reign of God.”

deliberation. Wisdom is needed to discern the right course of action, but often this wisdom is required at once, and the decision must be made immediately.¹³⁶ Wisdom is part of eschatological discipleship because it is essential for answering the question, “What time is it?” and the implied follow-up, “Now what must I do?” In order to act wisely, O’Donovan insists, “We must consider the time we occupy, formed by what we have learned to love, following what has been achieved for us, yet hearing and making answer now, in this new and instant moment.”¹³⁷ Eschatological discipleship, therefore, involves the cultivation of wisdom so that, in the moment of decision, we instinctively understand the best course of action in reliance on the Spirit for guidance.

Definition of Eschatological Discipleship

Now that we have explored in more detail four of the key terms that will be present throughout this book, we are ready to provide a preliminary definition of eschatological discipleship. In short, *eschatological discipleship* is *spiritual formation that seeks to instill wisdom regarding the contemporary setting in which Christians find themselves (in contrast to rival conceptions of time and progress) and that calls for contextualized obedience as a demonstration of the Christian belief that the biblical account of the world’s past, present, and future is true.*

As one can see from this definition, *discipleship* is explained as “spiritual formation” leading to “contextualized obedience.” A *worldview* is what helps us evaluate our “contemporary setting” and leads us to discern our times. *Eschatology* refers to “the contemporary setting,” as opposed to “rival conceptions of time and progress,” and also refers to the truth of the gospel and the future of the world. *Wisdom* is what formation seeks to “instill” in order to help us make the right decisions in our cultural context in light of Scripture. In the following chapters, we walk through the Scriptures to see where we find this understanding of eschatological discipleship, particularly the eschatological grounding of ethical choices.

136. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 80. In speaking of deliberation, we must take care to avoid the fallacy of thinking we reflect and decide our way into every action. As James K. A. Smith writes, “Our being-in-the-world is characterized by inclinations that propel us to all sorts of action ‘without thinking,’ which is why eschatological discipleship is vital; it is the instilling of wisdom *so that* the inclinations that propel us into action have been shaped by Scripture and the great drama in which we find ourselves.

137. O’Donovan, *Finding and Seeking*, 145.