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Developing an African Christian Worldview

A Review Article of *Creation Regained*
by Albert Wolters,
(Inter-Varsity Christian Press; Leicester, England, 1986)
98 pp., np

Mark R. Shaw

It was decided long ago that African Christian theology should not sit quietly with its hands folded and allow western theology to be repeated verbatim in her classrooms and churches. The cry went up as indigenous theology stood to its feet that a new approach and fresh formulations of questions and answers were needed if Christianity would avoid the fate J. V. Taylor warned against in *The Primal Vision*. The fate was that of becoming a daylight religion of reason and thus irrelevant to the world of the dark--the world of the spirits and magic-- so real to Africans thus denying that "total victory of him who is Lord of the dark as well as of the day" (p 12-13). The response to that cry has been mixed. Solid advances in a truly Biblical African theology have appeared but so have theologies of a more syncretistic character that have sometimes tended to consecrate with one hand a reactionary attitude to western theology while with the other sprinkling theological holy water on the surrounding culture, all the while issuing firm assurances that this was the way forward. Black theology and African Liberation theology have joined African evangelical theology in uttering a weary groan over these failed attempts to contextualize our global faith. Yet the valid question remains--how do we do African theology in a distinctively Christian way, a way that avoids the pitfalls of either amputating the culture or swallowing it whole? In desperately short supply are fresh ways of approaching the problem.

Albert Wolter's *Creation Regained: A Transforming View of the World* may well be that needed fresh approach. Don't let the slender size of this IVP paperback fool you. It is loaded with insight, critical and creative thinking and may be one of the most thoroughly Biblical books I have ever read. Wolters is Associate Professor of Religion and Theology as well as Classical Languages at Redeemer College in Ontario, Canada and also teaches at the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto. His little book tackles the enormous subject of building a Biblical worldview. His thesis is deceptively simple: to reform our often fragmented and patchwork worldviews and conform them more closely to Scripture we need to grasp the cosmic scope of the Biblical doctrines of creation, fall and redemption (pp 10,71). He unpacks this richly laden thesis in four chapters that deal with the topics of worldview, creation, fall and redemption respectively, concluding with a chapter that gives helpful examples of how

to apply the Biblical view to life's issues.

Chapter 1, entitled "What is a Worldview" gives some basic ideas and definitions that make the rest of the book intelligible. He defines worldview, rather loosely, as the "comprehensive framework of one's basic beliefs about things" (p. 2). Everybody has a worldview we are told because everyone has beliefs that guide action and interpret events around us in some kind of sensible way. A worldview varies somewhat from a "philosophy of life" in that the former is less self-conscious and is more caught than taught. What does this have to do with the Christian? For we who are members of the church of Christ whether we hail from Aberdeen or Abidjan the worldview question is particularly pressing. We often find ourselves growing up with or subtly absorbing traditional worldviews that are at points hostile to Scripture. "What is the relationship of worldview to Scripture?", Wolters asks. "The Christian answer is clear: our worldviews must be shaped and tested by Scripture" (p. 6). There is a problem, however in allowing the Scriptures to influence the shaping of our worldviews:

As Christians we confess that the Scriptures have the authority of God, which is supreme over everything else--over public opinion, over education, over child-rearing, over the media, and in short over all the powerful agencies in our culture by which our worldview is constantly being shaped. However, since all these agencies in our culture deliberately ignore, and in fact usually reject outright, the supreme authority of Scripture, there is considerable pressure on Christians to restrict their recognition of the authority of Scripture to the area of the church, theology, and private morality--an area that has become basically irrelevant to the direction of culture and society as a whole. (p 6)

Christians often respond to this pressure by becoming dualists. That is to say, they loudly affirm the authority of Scripture, but silently regard it as irrelevant in academic, intellectual, economic, political or "secular" spheres. Christ is lord but his lordship is over a little island of piety floating in my heart. Wolters has an answer to the problem of the dualism that affects the African Church as much as the North American or European Church--a return to the reformational world. This worldview, rooted in the Scriptures is distinct from other so-called Christian worldviews for primarily two reasons.

The first distinctive feature is its insistence that the Biblical doctrines of creation, fall and redemption are cosmic in scope and not simply cultic words relegated to "sacred" realms which leave untouched the "secular" realm. Exploring this distinctive is the central burden of the remainder of the book. The second distinctive of the reformational worldview is that it interprets the Biblical concept of salvation as the "restoration of creation" rather than "escape from creation" or some other extra-creational experience. Wolters had me

listening and listening intently by this point. How would he develop these ideas? Chapters on Creation (2), Fall (3) and Redemption (4) answered my question.

A Worldview shaped by the Doctrine of Creation

Five points made in Wolters' discussion of creation seem to me germane to the construction of a consistently Christian worldview. The first insight deals with the scope of creation and its law. Creation is not just snow-capped Kiliminjaro or the circulatory system, that is to say, areas normally consigned to the physical sciences. Creation is instead cosmic, covering cultural activity as well as history and science. Creation stands for the whole realm and range of human activity as well as nature (Gen 1:28). God rules this creation by imbedded norms or laws (Col 1:16,17). Man's task is to use his own abilities and the earth's potentialities in a way faithful to God's intended purpose and their own inherent standards and norms. Wolters illustrates:

The worlds of art and pedagogy are bound to given standards....Not all art is good art. Both artists and aestheticians are called, each in their own ways, to discern the criteria that define good art--criteria that are not arbitrary but rooted in a given order of things that must be honored. Things are no different in the fields of pedagogy and child rearing. There are stages of emotional and intellectual maturity in the child's development that must be respected by the educator. The teacher cannot afford to ignore a child's natural curiosity or spontaneous playfulness. A pedagogy that ignores these given realities is antinormative; it flies in the face of the law of creation (p. 23).

But how can we discover those norms and God-given standards in the confusing varieties of our cultural and societal life? Here a second point about creation is relevant. Creation is fundamentally knowable. Wolters surveys many texts that point to the clarity of creation but his discussion of Proverbs 8 and Isaiah 28 is most revealing. Wisdom is so imbedded in every aspect of creation, culture, society and experience that the writer of proverbs exults about "the feast of insight and understanding to which Lady Wisdom invites mankind" (p. 27). Isaiah 28: 23-29 makes some suggestive points that Wolters summarizes:

The Lord teaches the farmer his business. There is a right way to plow, to sow, and to thresh, depending on the kind of grain he is growing....A good farmer knows that and this knowledge too is from the Lord, for the Lord teaches him. This is not a teaching through

the revelation of Moses and the Prophets, but a teaching through the revelation of creation--the soil, the seeds, and the tools of his daily experience.... An implication of the revelation of God in creation is that the creation order is *knowable*. This fundamental knowability of the creation order is the basis of all human understanding, both in science and in everyday life. (pp 28-29)

Worldviews divide on this question of the essential knowability and revelatory nature of creation/culture. The built-in meaning of all things stamped by the creator with an invisible "made by God and to be used as he intended" is denied by many non-Christian worldviews and is often ignored by Christians. Wolters in contrast has reminded us of the great value God places on his general revelation.

But doesn't such a position downplay Scripture? Are we not in danger of denying the great reformation principle of *sola scriptura*? We note a third point in Wolters discussion: Scripture augments and corrects our understanding of creation--law and presents us with the story and truths of redemption about which creation is silent. There is no need to reconcile friends.

A fourth point about creation relates to the role of historical development. Gen 1:28, the cultural mandate, is the founding charter for human development and the creative exploration of creation which Wolters describes as "crying out to be implemented in new and amazing ways (p 38)." Man is not to be glorified as the measure of all things but God is to be glorified as we "participate in the ongoing creational work of God, to be God's helper in executing to the end the blueprint for his masterpiece."(p 38).

Yet doesn't sin mean that creation and culture have been ruined? "If God does not give up on the works of his hands, we may not either", declares Wolters (p 39) or more pointedly: "God does not make junk and He does not junk what He has made."(p 42) This fifth point spills over into the idea that we must, as Christians, always insist on the essential goodness of creation (Wolters uses the image of a sick child whom the parents never abandon but relentlessly fight the disease that threatens the child until that life is restored to health) for this essential goodness is denied by many alternative worldviews. Man's misery is blamed on his body, psyche, finitude, authorities over him, law, society, environment, reason, technology, culture, etc. Man will blame this temple of God's glory for everything rather than face the true origin of human misery--sinful rebellion. Rebellious man will do anything rather than submit to God's creation laws. "Humanism", writes Wolters, "defines humanity in terms of freedom, and defines freedom as autonomy, obeying no laws but one's own." The Bible in contrast sees the essence of our humanity in servanthood and loving submission to the Creator's will. "Humanism considers law to be the *contradiction* of freedom; the Bible considers law to be the *condition* of freedom."(p. 43) Why is man instinctively hostile to creation? Wolters' chapter on the Fall explains the problem.

A Worldview Aware of the Effects of the Fall

Wolters describes the effects of the fall on human life in chapter 3. Rebellion against God's person and law has touched all of life. "Whether we look at societal structures such as the state or family, or cultural pursuits such as art or technology, or bodily functions such as sexuality or eating, or anything at all with the wide scope of creation, we discover that the good handiwork of God has been drawn into the sphere of human mutiny against God" (p 44). The death principle of Ecclesiastes ("all is empty") is woven into the fabric of God's inherently meaningful creation. Evil is the perversion of the good but not the annihilation of the good. While creation and culture have been split down the middle with rebellion and corruption, they are still redeemable. "In short, evil does not have the power of bringing to naught God's steadfast faithfulness to the works of His hands" (p 47). For this reason Wolters argues that evil must be seen as sin rooted in corrupt and prideful desires of man and Satan. These desires and the cultural work that flows from them are riddled with corruption but the Christian when confronting sin must ask the "structural/directional" question: what is creational about this person, event or object and what about them or it is moving away from obedience to God or towards obedience? Asking the structural question keeps us from calling God's work evil. Asking the directional/obedience question keeps us from blindly yoking up with rebellious ideas, values or relationships.

A Worldview committed to the Cosmic Impact of Redemption

Wolters begins chapter 4 on redemption by noting that "virtually all of the basic words describing salvation in the Bible imply a *return* to an originally good state or situation" (p 57). Many salvation words begin with the prefix re-, such as redemption, restoration, reconciliation, renewal, regeneration (literally "a new genesis"). Even the greek word for salvation, *soteria*, has at its root the idea of health after sickness, and wholeness after danger. The implication is that salvation restores creation it does not junk it. Salvation is not escaping to heaven, or experiencing transports of religious ecstasy. When the Christian has been redeemed by Christ he has been made truly human again. His intended purpose to be God's image in creation, exercising dominion over all things for God's glory has now been restored. The regenerate Christian should then seek to be God's agent for restoring all creation and culture:

Marriage should not be avoided by Christians, but sanctified. Emotions should not be repressed but purified. Sexuality is not simply to be shunned, but redeemed. Politics should not be declared off limits, but reformed. Art ought not to be pronounced worldly, but claimed for Christ. Business must no longer be relegated to the secular world, but must be made to conform to

Christian standards. Every sector of human life yields such examples (p 58).

What is Christ's role in all of this? How does the cross of Christ restore art and literature or politics and music? Christ re-established the kingdom of God through his life, death and resurrection. The kingdom is not simply one of inner piety, nor is it a political kingdom like other political realms. Creation ruled by man under God's overlordship is the kingdom of God and when Christ cleansed rebellious mankind by the cross, God could recreate this righteous rule once again. Wolters distances the reformational view of the kingdom from humanistic versions represented by Liberation theology. Overly internalizing or politicizing the kingdom idea reveals the two realm thinking and reduces the kingdom to something "spiritual" or something "secular." Christ has established a beachhead in rebel territory for the reconstruction of the kingdom on earthly soil. The church is that beachhead. Through regenerate men and women the witness of the Kingdom can be extended to all of life and culture. Wolters spends a good bit of time reminding the reader that the line of rebellion is not between different spheres (e.g. the idea of some that prayer is "sacred" but politics is "secular" or sinful). The line of rebellion rather runs through the middle of every sphere (prayer can become filled with carnal corruptions and conversely politics can be used to advance justice and righteousness for God's good pleasure). "Redemption, then", Wolters concludes, "is the recovery of creational goodness through the annulment of sin and the effort toward the progressive removal of its effects everywhere. We return to creation through the cross, because only the atonement deals with sin and evil effectively at their root"(p. 69). I found Wolters understanding of the Kingdom of God and its implications for the church to be highly compatible with the conclusions drawn in such first rate exegetical /theological works as Geerhardus Vos' *The Kingdom and the Church* and Herman Ridderbos' *The Coming of the Kingdom*. Wolters calls us to follow Mark's version of the great commission by preaching "the good news to all creation"(Mark 16:15).

How do we work for this renewal of African life and culture in all spheres? Wolters concludes his argument in chapter 5 by discussing the distinctions between 4 words: reformation, consecration, revolution and repristination. The Biblical worldview calls for the Christian to purify all things from within (do cultural work for redeemed reasons, in a way that seeks and submits to creation—law and the power of the Holy Spirit). He never gives up on things refusing to call for a total and rapid change that destroys the old order. This is revolution which tears down but cannot build and renew. Reformation repudiates the way of consecration also whereby we give external blessing to unredeemed and unreformed ideas and institutions (e.g. just working for a Christian organization does not make my work Christian if I do it pridefully, immorally or sloppily yet working as a journalist with a hunger to exalt truth for God's glory would be Christian service). Reformation also rejects repristination which calls for repudiation of progress and a simplistic return to simple living. Cultural development for God's glory is a command. Technological growth must be reformed not abandoned.

One final illustration of how the reformational worldview works out in

life is seen in Wolters discussion on sphere sovereignty and totalitarianism. God created things after their "kind" implying that variety is a creational norm that must be kept sacred. Uniformity or the totalitarian rule of any creation structure whether family, church, or state over other spheres diminishes the richness of creation. Wolters writes:

Totalitarianism of whatever form is the directional perversion of the creational structures of society. The Christian is called to oppose all totalitarianism, whether of the state, church, or corporation, because it always signifies a transgression of God's mandated societal boundaries and an invasion into alien spheres(p. 83).

Spheres of life should co-operate but not dominate one another. Theocracy in the sense of a church-dominated society would be Biblically wrong from the perspective of a reformational worldview.

I am enthusiastic about Wolter's brief but penetrating presentation of the Biblical worldview. Yet I have some questions. Wolters is speaking from the perspective of someone influenced by the philosophy of Herman Dooyewerd formerly of the Free University of Amsterdam. Some British evangelicals like Oliver Barclay and American evangelicals like Cornelius Van Til have argued that dangers lurk in the shadows of this view. Most frequently mentioned is the idea that the Word of God becomes for a Dooyewerdian, one's interpretation of general revelation. Others point out that sphere sovereignty has been used as a justification of apartheid in South Africa. These are serious claims which one cannot take lightly. Yet I believe that Wolters presentation of reformational thinking is sufficiently rooted in the Scriptures to steer clear of these abuses of an otherwise promising way of thinking.

My enthusiasm centers largely on the value of this approach to the worldview question that haunts Africa. It would appear that the reformational worldview could help the church overcome the obstacles to the formation of an African Christian Theology that is authentically African, purified of western distortions, and yet exuding a glistening fidelity to the Word of God in Christ and in Scripture. By recovering the creational in African culture and life the church can work to extend the benefits of redemption to every sphere touched by the Gospel, which is every sphere. The future will be bleak for African Christian Theology and life if we on this continent simply shed one brand of dualism for another. With Biblical thinking Christ can at last become Lord over the dark as well as the day.