

## REDISCOVERING JOY

The problem is not only to win souls but to save minds.  
If you win the whole world and lose the mind of the world,  
you will soon discover you have not won the world.

CHARLES MALIK<sup>1</sup>

**B**y the time Sealy Yates was just twenty-five years old, he had already fulfilled his life's dreams. He had gone to law school, passed the bar exam, landed a great job. He had married a wonderful woman, and they were busy raising their first child. Life was good.

That's when Sealy slumped into a profound depression. He was too young for a midlife crisis, yet he found himself asking all the same questions: Is this all there is? Is this what I want to do for the rest of my life? What's the meaning of it all?

Sealy was not naturally depressive, so he probed for some reason behind it. And the answer he discovered was one that no psychologist would have guessed: The key to recovering joy and purpose turned out to be a new understanding of Christianity as total truth—an insight that broke open the dam and poured the restoring waters of the gospel into the parched areas of his life.

Years ago, at the age of fifteen, Sealy had responded to an altar call at a Baptist church. From that moment on, he knew deep in his bones that what he wanted most was to serve God. At first, he figured that meant doing church work of some kind—becoming a pastor, missionary, or music leader. “I wanted to live for God,” Sealy told me,<sup>2</sup> “and the only frame of reference I had said that meant full-time Christian work.”

There was only one problem: He didn't have the skills for any church-based profession. In reviewing his aptitude tests, however, a high school guidance counselor suggested that he consider becoming an attorney. The idea was electrifying. No one in Sealy's family had even gone to college, let alone law school. The very thought seemed to soar beyond the bounds of possibility. Nevertheless, he prayed, he worked hard, and now . . . he had made it.

So why wasn't he happy? Sealy's impossible dream had come true, yet he was miserable. He maintained a heavy schedule of church activities, but a spiritual hunger still gnawed at his heart. Maybe he had made a mistake? Maybe he really *had* been called to full-time church work but had ignored God's call? Maybe he should drop his job and go to the mission field?

Christians who are seriously committed to their faith often experience this inner tug-of-war. Like Sealy, most of us absorb the idea that serving God means primarily doing church work. If we end up in other fields of work, then we think serving the Lord means piling religious activities on top of our existing responsibilities—things like church services, Bible study, and evangelism. But where does that leave the job itself? Is our work only a material necessity, something that puts food on the table but has no intrinsic spiritual significance? Is it merely utilitarian, a way of making a living?

Sealy discovered that it was just such questions that were driving his depression: He had no idea how to integrate his Christian faith with his professional life. In his law classes at UCLA there had never been any mention of Christianity; none of his professors or classmates had shared his faith commitment; nor did any colleagues at the law firm where he now worked. And since his professional work took up most of his waking hours, that meant a large segment of his life was sealed off from what mattered most to him.

"Where is God in my life?" Sealy found himself asking. What he thought was depression turned out to be an agonized longing for spiritual meaning in his work. Adding church activities to a completely secularized job was like putting a religious frame on a secular picture. The tension between his spiritual hunger and the time demands of a purely "secular" job was tearing him apart inside.

Sealy's search for a solution was finally rewarded when he discovered a Christian study program that taught him how to address clients' spiritual lives. Instantly, a whole new world opened to him, as he came to realize that the law addresses issues connected to the whole person. After all, "people typically come to lawyers when they're in a crisis," he explained. "It's a phenomenal opportunity to help them do what's right." Lawyers can minister to troubled spouses seeking a divorce, counsel misguided teens in trouble with the law, advise ethically conflicted businessmen to do what's right, confront Christian ministries that are compromising biblical principles. The law is not merely a set of procedures or an argumentative technique. It is God's means of confronting wrong, establishing justice, defending the weak, and promoting the public good.

In every profession, the prevailing views stem from some underlying philosophy—basic assumptions about what is ultimately true and right. That

means Christians need not feel out of place bringing their *own* assumptions into the field. Sealy began to claim the freedom to bring biblical understandings of justice, rights, and reconciliation into the legal arena.

## SEALY'S SECRET

The dilemma Sealy faced is not uncommon for Christians in any profession. As we saw in the previous chapter, modern society is characterized by a sharp split between the sacred and secular spheres—with work and business defined as strictly secular. As a consequence, Christians often live in two separate worlds, commuting between the private world of family and church (where we can express our faith freely) and the public world (where religious expression is firmly suppressed). Many of us don't even know what it means to have a Christian perspective on our work. Oh, we know that being a Christian means being ethical on the job—as Sealy put it, “no lying or cheating.” But the work itself is typically defined in secular terms as bringing home a paycheck, climbing the career ladder, building a professional reputation.

For lawyers like Sealy, success is defined primarily as winning cases. The attitude in today's legal profession is that law has nothing to do with morality. Lawyers are little more than “hired guns” who are expected to defend their clients, right or wrong, with no regard for moral principles of truth or justice. They are admonished to keep their own moral perspective tucked tightly away in the private sphere; in the public sphere, their job is to give strictly legal advice.<sup>3</sup>

But no Christian, in any profession, can be happy when torn in two contrary directions. We all long for our work to count for something more than paying the bills or impressing our colleagues. How can we experience the full power of our Christian faith when it is locked away from the rest of life? How can we lead whole and integrated lives when we're required to shed our deepest beliefs along the way as we commute to work, functioning there from a purely “secular” mindset?

The dichotomies we've been talking about—secular/sacred and public/private—are not merely abstractions. They have a profoundly personal impact. When the public sphere is cordoned off as a religion-free zone, our lives become splintered and fragmented. Work and public life are stripped of spiritual significance, while the spiritual truths that give our lives the deepest meaning are demoted to leisure activities, suitable only for our time off. The gospel is hedged in, robbed of its power to “leaven” the whole of life.

How do we break free from the dichotomies that limit God's power in our lives? How can love and service to God become living sparks that light up our whole lives? By discovering a worldview perspective that unifies *both* secular

and sacred, public and private, within a single framework. By understanding that all honest work and creative enterprise can be a valid calling from the Lord. And by realizing there are biblical principles that apply to every field of work. These insights will fill us with new purpose, and we will begin to experience the joy that comes from relating to God in and through every dimension of our lives.

For Sealy, that meant discovering that practicing law is much more than a way to make money and win cases. It is fundamentally a way to execute God's own purposes in the world—to advance justice and contribute to the good of society. “God showed me how to live for him *in* my professional life,” Sealy told me. “It’s not just about running a business or making a living. In our work, we do the work of God. That’s when I rediscovered joy.”

## CAPITOL HILL GUILT

Probably most of us had not linked together the idea of Christian worldview with finding joy in life. Yet Sealy is right. It is only when we offer up everything we do in worship to God that we finally experience His power coursing through every fiber of our being. The God of the Bible is not only the God of the human spirit but also the God of nature and history. We serve Him not only in worship but also in obedience to the Cultural Mandate. If Christian churches are serious about discipleship, they must teach believers how to keep living for God after they walk out the church doors on Sunday.

Not long ago, after speaking on Capitol Hill, I was approached by a congressional chief of staff who confided, with some frustration, that many of the Christian young people who come to Washington feel “guilty” about their interest in politics.

“Guilty?” The notion was incomprehensible to me. “But why?”

“Well,” he explained, “they feel that if they were *really* committed to God, they wouldn’t be here. They’d be in the ministry.” Though many of these young people were graduates of Christian colleges, they had not been taught a Christian worldview. They still placed their professional work on the *secular* side of the secular/sacred split, regarding it as less valuable than religious activity.

A high-ranking Washington official once lamented how difficult it was to find people for government positions who were committed Christians and at the same time outstanding professionals. The problem, he told me, is that most Christians don’t have a biblical sense of calling in their jobs—and thus they fail to treat it as frontline work for the Kingdom. As an example, he related the story of a doctor who had stopped practicing medicine in order to join the staff of a Christian organization.

“I left my medical practice to work in ministry,” the doctor told him.

“Hold it,” the official broke in. “That’s exactly the problem: Your medical practice *was* a ministry, just as much as what you’re doing now.” Taken aback, the doctor confessed he had never thought of it that way before.

Ordinary Christians working in business, industry, politics, factory work, and so on, are “the Church’s front-line troops in her engagement with the world,” wrote Lesslie Newbigin. Imagine how our churches would be transformed if we truly regarded laypeople as frontline troops in the spiritual battle. “Are we taking seriously our duty to support them in their warfare?” Newbigin asked. “Have we ever done anything seriously to strengthen their Christian witness, to help them in facing the very difficult ethical problems which they have to meet every day, to give them the assurance that the whole fellowship is behind them in their daily spiritual warfare?”<sup>4</sup> The church is nothing less than a training ground for sending out laypeople who are equipped to speak the gospel to the world.

## BECOMING BILINGUAL

In a sense, Christians need to learn how to be bilingual, translating the perspective of the gospel into language understood by our culture. On one hand, we all learn to use the language of the world: If we’ve gone through the public education system, “we have been trained to use a language which claims to make sense of the world without the hypothesis of God,” as Newbigin puts it. But then, “for an hour or two a week, we use the other language, the language of the Bible.”<sup>5</sup> We are like immigrants—like my own grandparents, who came to America from Sweden. During the Lutheran church service on Sunday, they spoke their familiar mother tongue; but for the rest of their lives they had to employ the strange-sounding English of the land where they had settled.

Yet Christians are not called to be *only* like immigrants, simply preserving a few customs and phrases from the old country. Instead, we are to be like missionaries, actively translating the language of faith into the language of the culture around us.

The uncomfortable truth is that we don’t seem to be doing very well as linguists. Columnist Andy Crouch tells the story of a Christian professor at Cornell University who was concerned about the Christian students in his classes. They “hardly say a thing,” the professor complained. The only way I even know that they’re fellow believers is when “they come up after class and furtively thank me.” Here was a professor actively seeking to create a friendly environment where Christian students would feel free to participate—“but they won’t say anything!”<sup>6</sup>

Why not? The answer is that most Christian students simply don't know how to express their faith perspective in language suitable for the public square. Like immigrants who have not yet mastered the grammar of their new country, they are self-conscious. In private, they speak to one another in the mother tongue of their religion, but in class they are uncertain how to express their religious perspective in the accents of the academic world.

## THE FAITH GAP

Polls consistently show that a large percentage of Americans claim to believe in God or to be born again—yet the effect of Christian principles is decreasing in public life. Why? Because most evangelicals have little training in how to frame Christian worldview principles in a language applicable in the public square. Though Christianity is thriving in modern culture, it is *at the expense* of being ever more firmly relegated to the private sphere.

Another way to phrase it is that the private sphere has become increasingly religious, while at the same time the public sphere has become increasingly secular. In a 1994 poll, 65 percent of Americans said religion is losing its influence in public life—yet almost the same number, 62 percent, said the influence of religion was actually *increasing* in their personal lives.<sup>7</sup> This means the divide between public and private realms has widened to a yawning chasm, making it harder than ever for Christians to cross over in order to bring biblically based principles into the public arena.

Privatization has also changed the *nature* of religion. In the private realm religion may enjoy considerable freedom—but only because the private sphere has been safely cordoned off from the “real” world where the “important” activities of society take place. Religion is no longer considered the source of serious truth claims that could potentially conflict with public agendas. The private realm has been reduced to an “innocuous ‘play area,’” says Peter Berger, where religion is acceptable for people who need that kind of crutch—but where it won't upset any important applecarts in the larger world of politics and economics.<sup>8</sup>

By allowing religion to be restricted to a segregated area of life, however, we have undercut one of its primary purposes, which is precisely to provide a sense of life's overarching meaning. As Berger writes, privatization “represents a severe rupture of the traditional task of religion, which was precisely the establishment of an integrated set of definitions of reality that could serve as a common universe of meaning for the members of a society.”<sup>9</sup> In fact, many evangelicals no longer even think it *is* the task of religion to provide a “common universe of meaning.” Today religion appeals almost solely to the needs

of the private sphere—needs for personal meaning, social bonding, family support, emotional nurturing, practical living, and so on. In this climate, almost inevitably, churches come to speak the language of psychological needs, focusing primarily on the therapeutic functions of religion. Whereas religion used to be connected to group identity and a sense of belonging, it is now almost solely a search for an authentic inner life.

People often become very attached to a religion that addresses their emotional and practical needs in this manner. In an increasingly impersonal public world, people are hungry for resources to sustain their personal and private world. Nonetheless, it represents a truncated view of Christianity's claims to be the truth about all of reality. "Secularization did not cause the death of religion," says theologian Walter Kasper, but it did cause it to "become but one sector of modern life along with many others. Religion lost its claim to universality and its power of interpretation."<sup>10</sup> That is, Christianity no longer functions as a lens to interpret the whole of reality; it is no longer held as total truth.

In essence, Christians have accepted a trade-off: By acquiescing in the privatization process, Newbigin says, Christianity "has secured for itself a continuing place, at the cost of surrendering the crucial field."<sup>11</sup> In other words, Christianity has survived in the private sphere, but at the cost of losing the ability to make a credible claim in the public sphere or to challenge the reigning ideologies.

The reason Newbigin was so sensitive to the problem is that he lived for forty years as a missionary in India, which is not plagued by the same secular/sacred, public/private split. The mentality of Indian Christians is that *of course* religion permeates all of life. The same is true of African Christians. "In most human cultures, religion is not a separate activity set apart from the rest of life," Newbigin explains. In these cultures, "what we call religion is a whole worldview, a way of understanding the whole of human experience."

On a global scale, then, the secular/sacred dichotomy is an anomaly—a distinctive of Western culture alone. "The sharp line which modern Western culture has drawn between religious affairs and secular affairs is itself one of the most significant peculiarities of our culture, and would be incomprehensible to the vast majority of people."<sup>12</sup> In order to communicate the gospel in the West, we face a unique challenge: We need to learn how to liberate it from the private sphere and present it in its glorious fullness as the truth about all reality.

## DISCONNECTED DEVOTION

The first step in the process is simply identifying the split mentality in our own minds, and diagnosing the way it functions. The dichotomy is so familiar that

Christians often find it difficult *even to recognize* it in their own thinking. This struck me personally when I read about a survey conducted a few years ago by Christian Smith, a sociologist at the University of North Carolina (and himself an evangelical believer).<sup>13</sup> The results of the survey highlight both the good news and the bad news about American evangelicalism.

The good news was that, on several measures of religious vitality, evangelicals came out consistently on top. It's clear that evangelicals are highly committed to their faith; they speak the language of the gospel fluently. On the other hand, when asked to articulate a Christian worldview perspective on *other* subjects—areas such as work, business, and politics—they had little to say. They seemed unable to translate a faith perspective into language suitable for the public square.

The survey compared evangelicals to four other groups: fundamentalists, mainline Protestants, liberal Protestants, and Roman Catholics.<sup>14</sup> Let's look at a few examples of the findings. First, the good news. When asked about their view of the Bible, some 97 percent of evangelicals said it is inspired by God and without errors. Compare that to the other groups surveyed:

- 97% of evangelicals
- 92% of fundamentalists
- 89% of mainline Protestants
- 78% of liberal Protestants
- 74% of Catholics

Evangelicals were also the most likely to say they have committed their life to Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Savior:

- 97% of evangelicals
- 91% of fundamentalists
- 82% of mainline Protestants
- 72% of liberal Protestants
- 67% of Catholics

Here's the percentage who say their religious faith is very important to them:

- 78% of evangelicals
- 72% of fundamentalists
- 61% of mainline Protestants
- 58% of liberal Protestants
- 44% of Catholics

Do absolute moral standards exist? “Yes”:

75% of evangelicals  
 65% of fundamentalists  
 55% of mainline Protestants  
 34% of liberal Protestants  
 38% of Catholics

Do you have doubts about your faith? “Never”:

71% of evangelicals  
 63% of fundamentalists  
 62% of mainline Protestants  
 44% of liberal Protestants  
 58% of Catholics

A question particularly relevant to this book: How important is it to defend a biblical worldview in intellectual circles? “Very important”:

63% of evangelicals  
 65% of fundamentalists  
 46% of mainline Protestants  
 49% of liberal Protestants  
 (Catholics not polled)

The numbers make it clear that on many measures of religious vitality, evangelicalism is doing very well.<sup>15</sup> Historians and sociologists are notorious for predicting the demise of Christianity in the modern world: Most accept the “secularization thesis,” which states that as societies modernize, they inevitably secularize. But the secularization of America has been vastly overstated. The evidence shows that evangelicalism is thriving even in today’s highly modernized society.

If that’s the good news, then what’s the bad news? The bad news is that when asked to articulate a biblical worldview perspective on issues in the public square, no one could do it. *Not one person* in the entire survey. Respondents spoke strictly in the language of individual morality and religious devotion; they seemed unable to express a Christian philosophy of business, politics, or culture.<sup>16</sup>

This comes alive if we read a few examples in their own words. When asked how to have a transforming effect on the broader culture, a Baptist woman

replied, “I just feel that if each individual lived the Christian life, . . . it influences society. We just need to live the life that Christ wants us to live, the best we can, to influence society in general.” A Christian charismatic told the survey takers, “For me, the solution to the world’s problems is becoming a Christian, okay?” A Church of Christ man said, “Just believe in Christ and live the best you can the way he wants you to, and that would change the whole world.”<sup>17</sup>

These answers contain a great deal of truth, of course; but that truth is limited to individual conversion and personal influence. None of the respondents talked about critiquing the worldviews that shape modern public life, or about developing a Christian theory of social order.

When asked how Christianity should affect the world of work and business, most thought only of injecting religious activities into the workplace. A woman from a seeker church said, “There are opportunities . . . to have Bible study on company time, a prayer breakfast, outreach of some kind.” A Pentecostal man (with apparently a tough job), said, “I don’t let them cuss excessively on the job. . . . No drinking, no alcohol, no coming to work drunk. Also, we pray most of the time before we start work in the morning.”<sup>18</sup>

Other respondents stressed their own moral witness on the job. Christians “should be the most honest employees they have,” a Presbyterian man replied. “If you are working for someone, you shouldn’t steal or take an extra ten minutes for lunch break.” In fact, honesty was the single factor most often mentioned—listed by more than one out of three evangelicals. When survey-takers pressed the issue, asking whether Christians could do anything else for the economy, a Church of Christ man answered, “No, because if everybody would be honest, that’s all it would take.” A Baptist woman said, “If you [are honest], most everything will take care of itself.”<sup>19</sup>

Of course, we have to commend those who start Bible studies in the work place or try to exert a moral influence. But what about a biblical perspective on the work itself? There’s something missing when we don’t hear any respondents talking about their work itself as service to God or as fulfillment of the Cultural Mandate—the biblical command to subdue the earth (see chapter 1). Even when pressed, none of the respondents offered any biblical principles of economics or seemed aware of the impact of systemic economic forces or institutions.

Finally, what about politics? A woman attending an evangelical Moravian church told the survey, “What can a Christian accomplish in politics? Be a moral presence.” A Church of Christ man said, “Why should Christians be active [in politics]? Because I think souls should be saved. . . . If I can help somebody [go to heaven] by being in the government, . . . that would make me feel good.”<sup>20</sup>

No one would deny that Christians are called to be evangelists *wherever* they are—including politics. But political office is not just a platform for sharing the gospel. We are also called to work out a biblical perspective on the state and politics. God created the state for a purpose, and we need to ask what that purpose is. How do Christians work to advance justice and the public good?

On occasions when respondents did address specific political issues, they typically mentioned abortion and homosexuality. Why these particular issues? Because they are easy to conceptualize in terms of individual morality. By the same token, solutions to social problems were phrased almost solely in terms of individual voluntary activities—missions of mercy to the poor, the homeless, the addicted. “Worthy as these projects may be,” Smith comments, “none of them attempt to transform social or cultural systems, but merely to alleviate some of the harm caused by the existing system.”<sup>21</sup>

The study provides a fascinating snapshot of contemporary evangelical Christians, pinpointing with deadly accuracy both their strengths and their weaknesses. On one hand, their hearts are in the right place: They are sincere, serious, committed. On the other hand, their faith is almost completely privatized: It is usually restricted to the area of personal behavior, values, and relationships. Even when evangelicals do try to influence the public sphere, their main strategy is to import activities from the private sphere, like prayer meetings and evangelism. Friends who work on Capitol Hill tell me there are several Christian groups that minister to politicians and staffers, yet virtually all of them limit their ministry to one’s personal devotional life—“How’s your walk with Jesus?” Few challenge those in politics to think about the issues themselves from a biblical perspective—“What is a Christian political philosophy? How does your faith perspective influence the way you’re going to vote today on the bills before Congress?”

Before we can even begin to craft a Christian worldview, we first need to identify the barriers that prevent us from applying our faith to areas like work, business, and politics. We need to try to understand why Western Christians lost sight of the comprehensive call God makes on our lives. How did we succumb to a secular/sacred grid that cripples our effectiveness in the public sphere? To break free of this destructive thought pattern, we need to understand where it came from, identify the forms it has taken, and trace the way it became woven into the pervasive patterns of our thinking. We will discover that, from the beginning, Christianity has been plagued by dualisms and dichotomies of various kinds. And the only way to free ourselves from dualistic thinking is to make a clear diagnosis of the problem.

## CHRISTIAN SCHIZOPHRENIA

To make that diagnosis, we must go back to the early church and its encounter with Greek thought. Imagine the earliest believers: Small, embattled groups surrounded by an alien culture with its own established language, literature, culture, civic institutions—and, most powerful of all, the rich intellectual tradition of Greek philosophy. How would the early church defend its faith in the resurrection of Jesus over against the highly developed philosophies of the day?

The classical thinkers taught much that was good. You know the names: Homer, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle. They emphasized the rational order of the universe, which was later to become an important inspiration for the development of modern science. They stood against the materialists and hedonists of their day, asserting the eternal ideals of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. They argued that knowledge was objective, not merely a social convention. Plato even offered an argument from design based on the goal-directed order in nature.<sup>22</sup> All this and more, Christian thinkers found very congenial, and eventually they began adopting many elements of classical philosophy as intellectual tools to give philosophical expression to their own biblical faith.

Yet the Greek thinkers were pagans, and many of their doctrines were incompatible with biblical truth. Instead of giving a comprehensive description of classical thought, we will zero in on some of these problematic elements. To be fair, the church fathers almost couldn't help absorbing a good bit of Greek thought. It was, after all, the only conceptual language available to them as they sought to address the educated world of their day. But it came with some serious negative baggage—especially what Schaeffer calls a “two-story” view of reality.<sup>23</sup> Classical thought drew a stark dichotomy between matter and spirit, treating the material realm as though it were less valuable than the spiritual realm—and sometimes outright evil. Thus salvation was defined in terms of ascetic exercises aimed at liberating the spirit from the material world so that it could ascend to God.

This may sound abstract, so let's make it concrete by examining the two key figures who had the greatest impact on Christian thought.

### *Why Plato Matters*

The dualism just described was especially strong in Plato, the philosopher who had by far the greatest impact on Christian thinkers through the Middle Ages (especially through a later adaptation known as neo-Platonism).<sup>24</sup> Plato taught that everything is composed of Matter and Form—raw material ordered by rational ideas. Think of a statue: It consists of marble crafted into a beautiful

shape according to a design or blueprint in the artist's mind. Matter on its own was regarded as disordered and chaotic. The Forms were rational and good, bringing about order and harmony.

In fact, the realm of pure Form was actually considered *more real* than the material world, strange as that sounds to us today. Plato painted a powerful word picture to suggest that the world of ordinary experience—the world we know by sight and sound and touch—is merely a play of shadows cast on the wall of a cave. Most people are captivated by the shadow show and mistake it for reality, he said. But the philosopher is the enlightened one who manages to escape the cave and discover the genuinely real world of immaterial Forms, the highest being Goodness, Truth, and Beauty. The point of Plato's word picture is that the material world is the realm of error and illusion: The path to true knowledge is to free ourselves from the bodily senses, so that reason can gain insight into the realm of Forms.

Why did Plato view the material world as inferior? As we saw in our discussion of mathematics in chapter 1, Plato regarded Matter as preexisting from all eternity. The role of the creator was merely to impose rational Form upon it. But the preexistence of Matter meant it had independent properties over which the creator had no control; as a result, the deity was never fully successful in forcing it into the mold of the Forms. This explains why there is always some chaos, disorder, and irrationality in the world.

In essence, Plato was offering a twofold origin for the world. Both Form and Matter are eternal: Form represents reason and rationality, while the eternal flow of formless Matter is inherently evil and chaotic. This twofold view of origins led to a two-story view of reality, with *Form* in the upper story and *Matter* in the lower story.

*Platonic dualism can be represented like this:*

### FORM

Eternal Reason

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### MATTER

Eternal Formless Flux

From a biblical perspective, the problem with Platonic dualism was that it identified the source of chaos and evil with some *part* of God's creation—namely, Matter. Creation was divided into two parts: the spiritual (superior, good) and the material (inferior, bad). This stands in clear opposition to the biblical worldview, which teaches that *nothing* exists from eternity over against

God. Matter is not some preexisting stuff with its own independent properties, capable of resisting God's power. God created it and thus has absolute control over it. This was the operative meaning of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*—that nothing is independent of God, but everything came from Him and is subject to Him.

In contrast to the Greeks, then, the Bible presents the material world as originally good: Since it was created by God, it reflects His good character.<sup>25</sup> The Bible does not identify evil with Matter or with any other part of creation, but with sin, which twists and distorts God's originally good creation. For example, Scripture does not treat the body as inherently sinful or less valuable.<sup>26</sup> When Paul urges us in Galatians 5 to avoid "the lusts of the flesh," he is not referring to the body but is using "flesh" as a technical term for the sinful nature.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, if the body were inherently sinful, the Incarnation would have been impossible, for Jesus took on a human body yet had no sin. The sheer, monumental fact that God Himself took on human form speaks decisively of the dignity of the body. For Greek thinkers, the most shocking claim Christians made was that God had become a historical person, who could be seen, heard, and touched. Rational inquiry could no longer simply reject the world of the senses but had to take account of history—events in time and space like Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection.<sup>28</sup>

### *That Rascal Augustine*

Another way to put it is that Scripture defines the human dilemma as *moral*—the problem is that we have violated God's commands. But the Greeks defined the human dilemma as *metaphysical*—the problem is that we are physical, material beings. And if the material world is bad, then the goal of the religious life is to avoid, suppress, and ultimately escape from the material aspects of life. Manual labor was regarded as less valuable than prayer and meditation. Marriage and sexuality were rejected in favor of celibacy. Ordinary social life was on a lower plane than life in hermitages and monasteries. The goal of spiritual life was to free the mind from the evil world of the body and the senses, so it could ascend to God.

Does this sound familiar? It describes much of the spirituality of the church fathers and the Middle Ages. The *really* committed Christian was the one who rejected ordinary work and family life, withdrawing to a monastery to live a life of prayer and contemplation. A Christian vocation was conceived of as separate from ordinary human life and community.

These ideas were derived not from the Bible but from Greek philosophy. Many of the church fathers were deeply influenced by Platonism, including

Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Jerome, and Augustine. On one hand, in their writings they took a strong stand for the goodness of creation, rejecting the twofold origin of the world. Every aspect of creation comes from the hand of God and bears the stamp of His handiwork. Yet, on the other hand, in practice most of them absorbed at least some of the Greeks' negative attitude toward the material world.<sup>29</sup>

The most influential was Augustine, a bright but rascally youngster (as he himself tells us) who rebelled against his mother's Christian faith and embarked on an intellectual quest for truth. He was first attracted to Manicheism (there are two gods, one good and the other evil). Later he became a Platonist, then finally converted to Christianity—without, however, ever quite giving up all the elements of Platonism. Most important, he retained an adapted notion of the double creation, teaching that God first made the Platonic intelligible Forms, and afterward made the material world in imitation of the Forms.

The effect of this modified dualism proved devastating. Even though Augustine explicitly affirmed the goodness of creation, his concept of a dual creation had the effect of undercutting what he said and leading to a two-story hierarchy: The immaterial world (the Forms) functioned as his upper story, which he regarded as superior to the material creation in the lower story. "Despite his averrals of the goodness and reality of the created order," says theologian Colin Gunton, "the sensible world is for him manifestly inferior to the intellectual—that Platonic dualism is never long absent from his writing."<sup>30</sup>

This dualistic view of creation led naturally to a dualistic view of the Christian life. Thus Augustine embraced an ethic of asceticism, based on the assumption that the physical world and bodily functions were inherently inferior, a cause of sin. The way to reach the higher levels of spiritual life was by renunciation and deprivation of physical wants. He regarded ordinary work in the world—what he called the "active" life—as inferior to the "contemplative" life of prayer and meditation shut away in monasteries. He also treated marriage as inferior to celibacy, and even recommended that married clergy not live with their wives.<sup>31</sup>

Partly because Augustine was such a towering figure in church history, a kind of Christianized Platonism remained the *lingua franca* among theologians all the way through the Middle Ages. It is a prominent thread woven through the writings of Boethius, John Scotus Erigena, Anselm, and Bonaventure, and was not challenged until the thirteenth century, when the works of Aristotle were reintroduced into Europe.

### *Aristotle and Aquinas*

In fact, the rediscovery of Aristotle's work represented a serious challenge to Christianity itself, for it presented a comprehensive pagan system that included not only philosophy but also ethics, aesthetics, science, and politics. Some Christians were so impressed that they resorted to an extreme two-story dichotomy—the so-called double-truth theory, where the upper and lower stories were regarded as actually contradictory to one another.

For example, Aristotle taught that the world was eternal, while of course Scripture teaches that it was created—and somehow, it was said, *both* are true. The most notorious proponent of the double-truth theory was a French theologian named Siger de Brabant, whose views are described in acid tones by G. K. Chesterton: “There are two truths; the truth of the supernatural world, and the truth of the natural world, which contradicts the supernatural world. While we are being naturalists, we can suppose that Christianity is all nonsense; but then, when we remember that we are Christians, we must admit that Christianity is true even if it is nonsense.”<sup>32</sup>

Of course, this itself was nonsense, and the man who rallied to oppose it was a Dominican named Thomas Aquinas. A gentle giant of a man, Aquinas was so taciturn that his friends nicknamed him the Dumb Ox. But his words flowed fluently when he rose to attack the double-truth theory. Aquinas labored mightily to “Christianize” Aristotle's philosophy, rejecting what was clearly unscriptural and seeking to reinterpret the rest in a form compatible with Christianity (just as earlier thinkers had done with Plato).<sup>33</sup>

The end result was that Aquinas retained the dualistic framework of Greek philosophy while changing the terminology. In the upper story he put *grace*, and in the lower story he put *nature*—not nature in the modern scientific sense but in the Aristotelian sense of the “nature of a thing,” meaning its ideal or perfect form, its full potential, the goal toward which it strives, its *telos*. In Aristotle's philosophy, all natural processes are *teleological*, tending toward a purpose or goal.<sup>34</sup>

This adaptation of Aristotle had several beneficial effects on Christian thought. For example, Aristotle had taught that natural processes are *good* because they are the means by which things fulfill their “nature” and arrive at their ideal or perfected form—as an acorn grows to become a full-grown oak or an egg matures into a rooster. This argument was picked up by Aquinas and aimed as a weapon against the Platonic idea that the material world (Matter) is inherently inferior. Against that view, Aquinas argued that the creation (nature) is good because it is the handiwork of a good Creator. As one historical account put it, the message of Christian Aristotelianism “was that God is

good, His creation is good, [and] the goodness and the causality of the Creation are evidence of the goodness of God.”<sup>35</sup>

Thus Aquinas struck a blow at the world-denying asceticism so common during the Middle Ages, and recovered a more biblical view of creation. This had an immediate effect in the arts, where it inspired a more natural and realistic style of painting in the works of artists like Cimabue and Giotto. It also encouraged the study of nature, preparing the ground for the scientific revolution.<sup>36</sup>

### *Fluffs of Grace*

Yet the fact that Aquinas retained a bi-level schema was eventually to undercut much of the good that he achieved. The Aristotelian definition of nature that Aquinas borrowed contained a hidden dynamite that was to blow the system apart. Why? Because it defined the “nature” of things—their goal or purpose or teleology—as immanent within the world. That meant the world did not need God, but was perfectly capable of reaching its purpose or full potential strictly on its own, by its own resources. This was particularly troublesome in the case of human beings: Is the purpose of our lives really circumscribed by the horizons of this world? Don’t we have a higher purpose? Can we really live the way we were meant to by our natural faculties alone? Don’t we need to be in relationship to God to be truly fulfilled?

The biblical answer, of course, is that all creation is ordered toward relationship with God, as Aquinas knew. But how could he make room for this biblical truth? His solution was to keep the Aristotelian concept of *nature* but restrict it to the lower story. Then, in the upper story, he added God’s supernatural *grace*. That is, over and above our natural faculties, God had endowed humans with a supernatural gift or faculty that enables them to be in relationship with God: “In the state of pure nature man needs a power *added to* his natural power by grace . . . in order to do and to will supernatural good.”<sup>37</sup> The state of “pure nature” had to be supplemented by an added-on state of grace. In his words, grace was a *donum superadditum*—meaning a gift (donum) that is added on (superadditum).

*Aquinas’s reworking of the two stories can be diagrammed like this:*

**GRACE**  
A Supernatural Add-On

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**NATURE**  
A Built-In Ideal or Goal

But this two-tiered schema of nature and grace proved unstable, and after Aquinas the two orders of existence had a tendency to separate and grow increasingly independent. Why? Because there was no real interaction or interdependence between them. Aristotelian “nature” remained complete and sufficient in itself, with grace merely an external add-on. No matter how much icing you spread on a cake, it’s still a separate substance. The things of the world and the things of God coexisted on parallel tracks, without relating in any intrinsic way. Those who came after Aquinas (the later scholastics) even tended to speak as though human life had two distinct goals or ends: an earthly one and a heavenly one—a view still held by some Roman Catholic theologians today. Here’s a recent expression: “There are in us, then, since there are two ends, one natural, one supernatural, two sets of virtues, two sets of habits, two sets of gifts, the one set natural the other supernatural.”<sup>38</sup>

The problem with this radical dichotomy was that it divided human nature itself in half. “Man, such as mediaeval Christendom conceived him, has been split in two,” writes Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain.

On the one hand, one has a man of pure nature, who has need only of reason to be perfect, wise, and good, and to gain the earth; and on the other, one has a celestial envelope, a believing double, assiduous at worship and praying to the God of the Christians, who surrounds and pads with fluffs of grace this man of pure nature and renders him capable of gaining heaven.

Thus, Maritain comments with heavy irony, “by a sagacious division of labor that the Gospel had not foreseen, the Christian will be able to serve two masters at once, God for heaven and Mammon for the earth, and will be able to divide his soul between two obediences each alike absolute and ultimate—that of the Church, for heaven, and that of the State, for the earth.”<sup>39</sup>

The practical impact of this nature/grace dualism was to reinforce the medieval two-tiered spirituality: Laypeople were thought to be capable of attaining only natural, earthly ends, which were clearly inferior, while the religious elites alone were thought capable of spiritual perfection, defined primarily in terms of performing rituals and ceremonies. Thus the religious professionals took over the spiritual duties of those deemed unable to fulfill them for themselves—saying prayers, attending mass, doing penance, going on pilgrimages, and performing acts of charity on behalf of the common folk.

### *The Reformers Rebel*

One of the driving motives of the Reformers was to overcome this medieval dualism and to recover the unity of life and knowledge under the authority of

God's Word. They argued that the medieval scholastics had accommodated far too much to pagan philosophers such as Aristotle, and they urged a more critical attitude toward the alleged truths of reason arrived at apart from divine revelation. (This is how we must understand Luther's overstated charge that "reason is the devil's whore"—he was not against reason per se but against reason applied outside the bounds of God's Word.) The Reformers sought a return to a unified field of knowledge, where divine revelation is the light illuminating all areas of study.

Above all, they soundly rejected the spiritual elitism implied by the nature/grace dualism. They threw out the two-tiered system of religious professionals versus lay believers, replacing it with a robust teaching of the priesthood of all believers (1 Pet. 2:9). Rejecting monasticism, they preached that the Christian life is not a summons to a state of life *separate from* our participation in the creation order of family and work, but is *embedded within* the creation order. Whereas in the Middle Ages the word *vocation* was used strictly of religious callings (priest, monk, or nun), Martin Luther deliberately chose the same term for the vocation of being a merchant, farmer, weaver, or homemaker. Running a business or a household was not the least bit inferior to being a priest or a nun, he argued, because all were ways of obeying the Cultural Mandate—of participating in God's work in maintaining and caring for His creation.

This was backed up theologically by rejecting the definition of grace as something added to nature (*donum superadditum*). That definition assumed that human nature on its own, as God created it, was not fit for relationship with Him but required the infusion of an additional power—which seemed to suggest that human nature was defective in some way. The Reformers were eager to banish any form of dualism that denigrated God's creation, and so they argued that God created human nature as good *in itself*. Grace was not a substance added onto human nature, but was God's merciful acceptance of sinners, whereby He redeems and restores them to their original perfect state.

We get a clearer picture of why this was so revolutionary from the Augsburg Confession, which gives us a window into the attitudes of that time. Prior to the Reformation, it says, "Christianity was thought to consist wholly in the observance of certain holy-days, rites, fasts, and vestures. These observances had won for themselves the exalted title of being the spiritual life and the perfect life." As a result, obedience to God in ordinary life was devalued. As the text explains:

The commandments of God, according to each one's calling, were without honor: namely, that the father brought up his offspring, that the mother bore

children, that the prince governed the commonwealth—these were accounted works that were worldly and imperfect, and far below those glittering observances.

This dual ranking system created genuine distress among spiritually committed lay believers: “This error greatly tormented devout consciences, which grieved that they were held in an imperfect state of life, as in marriage [or] in the office of magistrate. . . . They admired the monks and such like, and falsely imagined that the observances of such men were more acceptable to God.”<sup>40</sup> The Reformers’ hearts went out to these devout but devalued laypeople, and they strove to restore spiritual significance to the activities of ordinary life, performed in obedience to the Cultural Mandate.

Thus the Reformers contrasted the monastic call *from* the world with the biblical call *into* the world. As Jesus says to the Father in John 17:15, “I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one” while still in the world. Calvin articulated a view of ordinary work so distinctive that it later came to be called the Protestant work ethic. “He taught that the individual believer has a vocation to serve God in the world—in *every* sphere of human existence—lending a new dignity and meaning to ordinary work,” explains theologian Alister McGrath.<sup>41</sup> Calvin taught that Christ was the Redeemer of every part of creation, including culture, and that we serve him in our everyday work.

Despite all this, the Reformers’ emphatic rejection of the nature/grace dualism was not enough to overcome an age-old pattern of thought. The problem was that they failed to craft a *philosophical* vocabulary to express their new theological insights. Thus they did not give their followers any tools to defend those insights against philosophical attack—or to create an alternative to the dualistic philosophy of scholasticism.<sup>42</sup> As a result, the successors of Luther and Calvin went right back to teaching scholasticism in the Protestant universities, using Aristotle’s logic and metaphysics as the basis of their systems—and thus dualistic thinking continued to affect all the Christian traditions.

## ESCAPE FROM DUALISM

Over the centuries, of course, the definition of what is sacred and what is secular, or worldly, has been redefined. Among the Puritans, some defined worldliness in terms of wearing colorful clothing and ruffled collars; to be holy meant wearing dark, plain clothing. Today many older Christians can remember growing up in churches where it was still forbidden to dance, smoke, play cards, chew tobacco, wear makeup, or go to movies. When a friend of mine attended a Christian college several years ago, “mixed bathing” was still for-

bidden in the college swimming pool. Even now, walk into some fundamentalist churches and you feel like you've been transported back to the 1950s: All the men are in dark suits while all the women wear skirts below the knees with pumps and hose. The congregation might not exactly call it a sin for a woman to wear pants, but they certainly regard it as a "bad witness."

The problem with this secular/sacred dualism is that it does exactly what Plato did so many years ago: It identifies sin with some *part* of creation (dancing, movies, tobacco, makeup). Spirituality is defined as avoiding that part of creation, while spending as much time as possible in another part (church, Christian school, Bible study groups). This explains why work in the spiritual realm as a pastor or missionary is regarded as more important or valuable than being a banker or businessman. No wonder someone like Sealy Yates absorbed the attitude that the only way to really serve God was in full-time Christian ministry.

In *Loving Monday*, a businessman named John Beckett tells how he struggled to overcome this same dualistic thinking. Having come to God as an adult, Beckett soon discovered "a wide gulf" between his new faith and his work life. He realized, of course, that clear moral principles apply across the board. "But by and large," he says, "I found myself living in two separate worlds."<sup>43</sup>

Longing for "a much fuller integration of my two worlds," he began reading books by Francis Schaeffer and discovered, much as we have in this chapter, that ever since the Greeks the world of work and occupations has been demoted to the lower story. The obvious implication of this dualistic outlook was that it was "'impossible' to serve God by being a man or woman in business," Beckett writes. "For years, I thought my involvement in business was a second-class endeavor—necessary to put bread on the table, but somehow less noble than more sacred pursuits like being a minister or a missionary."<sup>44</sup>

Beckett's story reminds us that the Greek perspective is still alive and well, continuing to rob believers of the integrated life God promises. How did he free himself from this pervasive dualism? Through a new understanding of the cosmic scope of Creation, Fall, and Redemption. And you and I can overcome dualistic thinking in the same way, to bring healing and wholeness to our lives.

### *Creation: God's Fingerprints All Over*

Dualism was born, you will recall, because the Greeks thought Matter was pre-existing and eternal, capable of resisting the rational order imposed by the Forms. The obvious answer to that dualism, then, is the biblical doctrine that *nothing* is preexisting or eternal except God. He is the sole source of all creation; every part bears His fingerprints and reflects His good character in its original, created form. "The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof,"

writes the psalmist (Ps. 24:1). Everything bears the stamp of its Maker. Genesis presses the point home by repeating over and over again, of the newly created world, “And God saw that it was good” (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, etc.).

The implication is that no *part* of creation is inherently evil or bad. “Everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving,” Paul says (1 Tim. 4:4). Being spiritual cannot be defined simply in terms of roping off and avoiding certain parts of creation—whether movies, cards, dancing, or makeup. Once we understand this, Christians will never come across as negative kill-joys. While hating sin, we should exhibit a deep love for this world as God’s handiwork, seeing through its brokenness and sin to its original created goodness. We should be known as people in love with the beauties of nature and the wonders of human creativity.

Among the Reformers, it was Calvin who sounded this theme most consistently. Whereas Plato explained the order of the universe in terms of abstract ideals (Matter is ordered by rational Forms), Calvin explained its order as a product of God’s word or law or creative decree. The divine word gives things their “nature” or identity, governing both human life (moral law) and the physical universe (laws of nature). Modern people tend to place morality and science in completely different categories, but for Calvin both were examples of God’s law. The difference is only that humans must *choose* to obey the moral law, whereas natural objects have no choice but to obey the laws of physics or electromagnetism. If we look at the world through Calvinist eyes, we see God’s law governing every element in the universe, God’s word constituting its orderly structure, God’s truth discoverable in every field.

### *Fall: Where to Draw the Line*

Just as we must insist on the cosmic scope of Creation—that all creation came from God’s hand—so too we must insist on the cosmic scope of the Fall. Even the natural world has been affected by human sin, as we are told in Genesis 3 and Romans 8. Because humans were created to be God’s deputies exercising dominion over creation, their sin had a ripple effect that has extended into the natural world. This is simply one of the consequences of authority: If a father is harsh, the whole family is unhappy; if a CEO is unethical, the whole company is likely to be corrupt.

Against the Greek conception, we must insist that evil and disorder are not intrinsic in the material world but are caused by human sin, which takes God’s good creation and distorts it to evil purposes. “When Adam fell, it was the result of a rebellious will, and not because he had a body,” writes philosopher Gordon Clark.<sup>45</sup> That’s why Paul can write, “Nothing is unclean in itself”

(Rom. 14:14). It *becomes* unclean only when sinners use it to express their rebellion against God. The line between good and evil is not drawn between one part of creation and another part, but runs through the human heart itself—in our own disposition to use the creation for good or for evil.

For example, music is good, but popular songs can be used to glorify moral perversion. Art is a good gift from God, but books and movies can be used to convey nonbiblical worldviews and encourage moral decadence. Science is a vocation from God, but it can be used to undermine belief in a Creator. Sexuality was God's idea in the first place, but it can be distorted and twisted to serve selfish, hedonistic purposes. The state is ordained by God to establish justice, but it can be perverted into tyranny and injustice. Work is a calling from God, but in American corporate culture it is often an addiction—a frenzied scramble for a higher rung on the corporate ladder, a bigger salary, a more impressive résumé. In every area of life, we need to distinguish between the way God originally created the world, and the way it has been deformed and defaced by sin.

Reformed thinkers label this *structure* versus *direction*. Structure refers to the created character of the world, which is still good even after the Fall—music, art, science, sexuality, work, the state (to use the examples above). Direction refers to the way we “direct” those structures to serve either God or idols. In every enterprise in which we are engaged, we need to ask: (1) What is the original structure that God created, and (2) how is it being distorted and directed to sinful purposes?<sup>46</sup>

Even religious activity can be directed toward sin. We've probably all had the tragic experience of knowing pastors and ministry leaders who, despite impressive God-talk and skillful PR, are actually driven by spiritual pride, using their position as a means for power and influence instead of for service. Spiritual sin can be difficult to spot precisely because we are blinded by the secular/sacred split, which inclines us to classify the spiritual realm as the “good” part of creation. This makes it easy for religious leaders to gloss over wrongdoing by claiming it is necessary “to advance the ministry” or “to reach more people.” We need to bear in mind the powerful words of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, when he wrote, “The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either, but right through every human heart.”<sup>47</sup>

### *Redemption: After the Great Divorce*

Finally, just as all of creation was originally good, and all was affected by the Fall, so too all will be redeemed. God's ultimate promise is a new heavens and

a new earth, which means earthly life is not simply going to end; instead it's going to be fully sanctified. Heaven will not be a place of insubstantial spirits or disembodied minds floating around. Our physical bodies will be resurrected and restored, and we will dwell in a new earth. In the Apostles' Creed we affirm both Jesus' bodily resurrection and our own as well. His resurrection is the guarantee that we too will rise (1 Corinthians 15). As part of God's good creation, the material world will participate in the final redemption. In eternity, we will continue to fulfill the Cultural Mandate, though without sin—creating things that are beautiful and beneficial out of the raw materials of God's renewed creation.

This means that every valid vocation has its counterpart in the new heavens and new earth, which gives our work eternal significance. We cannot know exactly what life will be like in eternity, but the fact that Scripture calls it a new "earth," and tells us we will live there with glorified physical bodies, means that it will not be a negation of the life we have known here on the old earth. Instead it will be an enhancement, an intensification, a glorification of this life. In *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis pictures the afterlife as recognizably similar to this world, yet a place where every blade of grass seems somehow more real, more solid, more substantial than anything experienced here on earth.<sup>48</sup>

A young woman working as a technical writer once told me that her job was merely a way of establishing a financial base to do the things she *really* wanted—which consisted mostly of church activities. "I considered going back to school to learn how to write better," she explained. "But then I realized this won't exist in heaven, so it isn't worth studying." The young woman's commitment to spiritual matters is commendable, but she was mistaken in regarding her earthly vocation as merely a temporary expedient. In our work we not only participate in God's providential activity today, we also foreshadow the tasks we will take up in cultivating a new earth at the end of time. God's command to Adam and Eve to partner with Him in developing the beauty and goodness of creation revealed His purpose for *all* of human life. And after He has dealt with sin once for all, we will joyfully take up that task once again, as redeemed people in a renewed world.

This comprehensive vision of Creation, Fall, and Redemption allows no room for a secular/sacred split. All of creation was originally good; it cannot be divided into a good part (spiritual) and a bad part (material). Likewise, all of creation was affected by the Fall, and when time ends, all creation will be redeemed. Evil does not reside in some part of God's good creation, but in our abuse of creation for sinful purposes (structure versus direction). Paul defined sin as "anything not of faith"—that is, *anything* not directed to God's glory

and service. The other side of the coin is that, in redemption, “*all things* are ours” (see 1 Cor. 3:21).

This holistic vision can be wonderfully liberating. When John Beckett finally overcame the secular/sacred split, for the first time he was able to regard his work “as having great worth to God.” As “a business person, I was no longer a second-class citizen,” he exulted. “Nor did I need to leave my Christian convictions and biblical values outside the office entrance when I headed into work on Monday morning.”<sup>49</sup> This same liberating experience can be available to all of us, as we shed dualistic thinking and embrace a holistic Christian worldview.

## CHRISTIANITY OUT OF BALANCE

The task of identifying dualistic thinking can be somewhat tricky, because several different forms exist. However, the three-part grid of Creation-Fall-Redemption gives us a powerful tool of analysis. Throughout the history of the church, various groups have tended to seize upon one of these three elements, overemphasizing it to the detriment of the other two—producing a lopsided, unbalanced theology. For example, stressing the Fall too heavily tends toward pessimism and negativism, while overemphasizing Redemption can lead to triumphalism and complacency.

Let’s practice using the three-part grid by applying it to some common tendencies among Christian groups. Perhaps the most common imbalance in American evangelicalism is to overemphasize the Fall. Consider the typical evangelistic message: “You’re a sinner; you need to be saved.” What could be wrong with that? Of course, it’s true that we are sinners, but notice that the message starts with the Fall instead of Creation. By beginning with the theme of sin, it implies that our essential identity consists in being guilty sinners, deserving of divine punishment. Some Christian literature goes so far as to say we are nothing, completely worthless, before a holy God.

This excessively negative view is not biblical, however, and it lays Christianity open to the charge that it has a low view of human dignity. The Bible does not begin with the Fall but with Creation: Our value and dignity are rooted in the fact that we are created in the image of God, with the high calling of being His representatives on earth. In fact, it is only *because* humans have such high value that sin is so tragic. If we were worthless to begin with, then the Fall would be a trivial event. When a cheap trinket is broken, we toss it aside with a shrug. But when a priceless masterpiece is defaced, we are horrified. It is because humans are the masterpiece of God’s creation that the destructiveness of sin produces such horror and sorrow. Far from expressing

a low view of human nature, the Bible actually gives a far *higher* view than the dominant secular view today, which regards humans as simply complex computers made of meat—products of blind, naturalistic forces, without transcendent purpose or meaning.

If we start with a message of sin, without giving the context of Creation, then we will come across to nonbelievers as merely negative and judgmental. After an extended trip through Africa (described in *Dark Star Safari*), the writer Paul Theroux said one of the saddest moments in his journey was “hearing a young woman [missionary] tell me that she was heading for Mozambique and adding, ‘They’re all sinners, you know.’” Theroux concluded that missionaries only make people “despise themselves.”<sup>50</sup> We need to begin our message where the Bible begins—with the dignity and high calling of all human beings because they are created in the image of God.

### *More Than Sinners*

Moreover, in our secularized culture, starting with the Fall renders the rest of our message incoherent. In an earlier age, when most Americans were brought up in the church, they were familiar with basic theological concepts—which meant that the revivalist’s simple message of sin and salvation was often adequate. When people heard, “You’re a sinner,” they had the context to understand what it meant, and many were moved to repentance. But contemporary Americans often have no background in biblical teaching—which means that the concept of sin makes no sense to them. Their response is likely to be, What is *sin*? What right does God have to judge me? How do you know He even exists? Beginning with sin instead of creation is like trying to read a book by opening it in the middle: You don’t know the characters and can’t make sense of the plot.

As a result, even a pulpit-pounding, fire-and-brimstone sermon is likely to have only a limited effect at best. In my own pilgrimage back to faith as a teenager, I encountered a message of sin and judgment in the unlikelyst of places—in James Joyce’s semi-autobiographical book *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, which was required reading in a high school English class. When I read its description of Father Arnall’s hellfire sermons, dwelling in exquisite detail on the suffering of the damned, I had to admit that it was a bit frightening. I was impressed with a sense that *if* Christianity were true, then the decision to believe would be a genuinely life-and-death matter. I began to tell friends that maybe we should reconsider our relaxed relativism: *What if* there really is one single, universal Truth? A small step in the right direction, perhaps, but it certainly did not bring me to faith or repentance. The hellfire

images in Joyce's book served as nothing more than a metaphor for the seriousness of the search for truth. Isolated doctrines taken out of their biblical context do not even make sense to modern people, because they no longer have the background to supply the context on their own.

Finally, if we begin with the Fall instead of Creation, we will not be able to explain Redemption—because its goal is precisely to *restore* us to our original, created status. If it were true that we are worthless, and that being sinners is our core identity, then in order to have something of value God would have to destroy the human race and start over again. But He doesn't do that; instead He restores us to the high dignity originally endowed at Creation—recovering our true identity and renewing the image of God in us.

### *God's Offspring*

We can take a lesson from the way the apostles addressed various audiences in New Testament times. Their initial audiences consisted of the Jews of their day—people steeped in the Old Testament, with a firm grasp of key concepts like covenant, law, sin, and sacrifice. When addressing these audiences, the apostles could simply start with Jesus as the supreme sacrifice, the Lamb of God. With people already looking for the coming Messiah, the apostles could simply announce that Jesus was the One they were waiting for.

By contrast, when Paul addressed secular Greek philosophers in Acts 17, the Stoics and Epicureans on Mars Hill, where did he begin? With Creation. Notice how carefully he builds his argument, step by step. First he identifies God as the ultimate origin of the world: "The God who made the world and everything in it" is the "Lord of heaven and earth" (v. 24). Then he identifies this God as the source of our own humanity: "He made from one man every nation of mankind" (v. 26). Finally, he draws the logical conclusion: "Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone" (v. 29). That is, God cannot be akin to material things like idols. Since He made us, He must have at least the qualities we have as personal, moral, rational, creative beings. As water cannot rise above its source, so a nonpersonal object or force could not have produced personal beings like ourselves. It is logical to conclude that God too is a personal Being.

In that case, however, we stand in a personal relationship with God—we owe Him our allegiance, just as children owe honor and allegiance to the parents who brought them into the world. In fact, failure to acknowledge God is a moral fault and calls for repentance: "Now He commands all people everywhere to repent" (v. 30). Notice that it is only *after* having built a case based on Creation that Paul introduces the concepts of sin and repentance. In

addressing the pagan Greek culture, he first lays a foundation in the doctrine of creation. As Robert Bellah comments, “In order to preach Jesus Christ and him crucified to the biblically illiterate Athenians, Paul must convince them of the fundamentally Jewish notion of a creator. . . . Only in that context does the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ make sense.”<sup>51</sup>

Today, as we address the biblically illiterate Americans of the twenty-first century, we need to follow Paul’s model, building a case from Creation before expecting people to understand the message of sin and salvation. We need to practice “pre-evangelism,” using apologetics to defend basic concepts of who God is, who we are, and what we owe Him, before presenting the gospel message.

### *Jars of Clay*

If beginning with sin and judgment has historically been the most typical imbalance among Protestants, it is also possible to tilt in the opposite direction. Some groups weight Redemption more heavily than the Fall, leading to the doctrine of Christian Perfection or Holiness—the idea that we can become completely holy even in this life. For example, a central doctrine in the Wesleyan and Nazarene tradition is “entire sanctification,” the teaching that we can be made completely holy or freed from sin in the present life, instead of waiting for eternal life. These churches hold that believers are “made free from original sin, or depravity, and brought into a state of entire devotement to God, and the holy obedience of love made perfect” (in the words of the articles of faith of the Church of the Nazarene).<sup>52</sup>

The error here consists in holding that Redemption overcomes the Fall completely in this life. The Bible teaches that sin will not be completely conquered until Christ returns. On the cross, Christ defeated sin and Satan and won the decisive victory; yet much of the world remains under the power of the enemy until Christ returns as conquering King. We need to hold both of these truths together in proper balance. When the Pharisees asked Jesus when the kingdom would come, He answered, “the kingdom of God is in the midst of you” (Luke 17:21). Yet he also instructed His disciples to pray, “Thy kingdom come,” and taught that its coming has not yet been fully accomplished. Between Christ’s first and second coming, we must balance both the “already” and the “not yet” aspects of this interim phase.<sup>53</sup>

Picture the world as God’s territory by right of Creation. Because of the Fall, it has been invaded and occupied by Satan and his minions, who constantly wage war against God’s people. At the central turning point in history, God Himself, the second person of the Trinity, enters the world in the person of Jesus

Christ and deals Satan a deathblow through His resurrection. The Enemy has been fatally wounded; the outcome of the war is certain; yet the occupied territory has not actually been liberated. There is now a period where God's people are called to participate in the follow-up battle, pushing the Enemy back and reclaiming territory for God. This is the period in which we now live—between Christ's resurrection and the final victory over sin and Satan. Our calling is to apply the finished work of Christ on the cross to our lives and the world around us, without expecting perfect results until Christ returns.

This is not an excuse for complacency. We should still strive to develop a character of such quality that people can see a difference between the redeemed and the unredeemed. Our lives should exhibit a supernatural dimension that nonbelievers cannot explain away in terms of merely natural talent or energy.

Paul expressed the proper balance by saying we have a powerful spiritual treasure but it is held in fragile, breakable jars of clay (2 Cor. 4:7). This side of heaven, we should strive to live with all three elements held in balance: recognizing the created goodness of God's world (Creation), fighting the corruption of ongoing sin and brokenness (Fall), and working toward the healing of creation and the restoration of God's purposes (Redemption).

### *A Higher Consciousness?*

Some groups hold an even more extreme imbalance—that Redemption overcomes not only the Fall but even Creation itself. This is the conviction embraced by all sorts of utopian movements, including monasticism: the idea that the highest calling is not to recover God's purpose in Creation but to presage the final Redemption. Monasticism recognized that marriage is part of the creation order; nevertheless it rejected marriage as inferior and aspired instead to prefigure the glorified state, where there will be neither marrying nor giving in marriage, but we will be "like angels in heaven" (Mark 12:25). Thus in the monastic interpretation of this verse, celibacy was exalted as a way to foreshadow the final Redemption.<sup>54</sup>

Similarly, monasticism recognized that owning property is a natural right, rooted in creation and protected by the eighth commandment; nevertheless, by abandoning all property, monks and nuns sought to rise above the natural order to a higher state. Monasticism recognized a natural right to protect oneself, and for a nation to protect itself; yet it claimed for itself the higher calling of pacifism. And so on. Nor are these ideas restricted to monks and nuns: Throughout history, Christianity has seen the rise of various radical, utopian movements that rejected ordinary life, rooted in the creation order, for the sake of some supposed higher spirituality that would be an anticipation of eternity.

The error here is to assume that the order of Redemption destroys the order of Creation. And the antidote is to realize that Redemption is intended not to demolish God's good creation but to fulfill it. As we have seen, this was a theme in the writings of the Reformers, and of Thomas Aquinas before them. The way Aquinas put it was that grace does not *destroy* nature in order to replace it with something higher—instead grace *perfects* nature. He was using the verb “perfect” in the biblical sense of reaching a goal, achieving a purpose, fulfilling an ideal—as when James calls on believers to become “perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:4).<sup>55</sup> In Redemption, God does not call us to become something *other* than human but rather to *recover* our true humanity. He empowers us to achieve the purpose for which we were originally created—to fulfill our created nature, which He declared in Genesis to be “very good.”

Notice how Jesus Himself replied when the Jewish leaders challenged His teaching on marriage. What was His response? “He who created them from the beginning made them male and female” (Matt. 19:4). In other words, the creation order that God established “from the beginning” remains normative throughout human history. It is not an inferior order to be overcome or destroyed by Redemption. Genesis reveals what God intended for humanity from the start, and what it still means to live a fully human life today.

### *The Great Drama*

The tragedy is that in applying this corrective to medieval thought, Aquinas overcompensated and ended up with a new imbalance. We've talked about what happens when groups overemphasize the Fall or Redemption. But what happens when someone overemphasizes Creation? That's what Aquinas did, and it led to a truncated or incomplete view of the Fall.

Think back to our earlier discussion of Aquinas's nature/grace dualism, which treated grace as an addendum to nature—a suprahuman faculty given to Adam at Creation to supplement his natural faculties. What did this imply for Aquinas's view of the Fall? The answer is that when humans fell into sin, they lost *only* the added-on gift of supernatural grace (the upper story). They fell from the state of grace to the state of pure nature, losing the extra, suprahuman faculties but retaining their human faculties (the lower story) essentially intact and unchanged.<sup>56</sup>

But notice what this implies: If only the upper story fell, then only the upper story needs to be redeemed. The lower story does not. Spiritually, we need a re-infusion of supernatural grace, but our ordinary human nature does not participate in either the Fall or Redemption.<sup>57</sup>

As a result, the gospel was restricted to the upper-story realm of religion and theology. In those areas, humans needed divine revelation and the enlightening of God's Spirit. But in the lower-story realm of science, philosophy, law, and politics, human reason was thought to function quite adequately on its own. Reason was regarded as spiritually neutral or autonomous, not affected by the Fall nor in need of direction from God's Word. In other words, in these subject areas, there was *no distinctively biblical perspective*. Everyone could simply accept whatever "reason" decrees.

This differs sharply from classic Protestant teaching, which defines sin as turning away from God at the core of our being—thus coloring *everything* we think or do. Our entire being is involved in the great drama of sin and redemption. There is no aspect of human nature unaffected by the Fall, no independent realm known by a spiritually neutral reason. Indeed, it's a mistake even to think of reason as neutral, in the sense of being independent of any philosophical or religious commitments. As we saw in chapter 1, all systems of thought begin with some basic premise—some ultimate principle that is regarded as self-existing or divine. Reason is merely the human capacity to reason from those starting premises.

In short, reason is always exercised in service to some ultimate religious vision. People interpret the facts in the light of either biblical revelation or some competing system of thought. When Calvinists use the phrase *total depravity*, this is what they mean: not that humans are hopelessly evil but rather that *every aspect* of human nature has been affected by the Fall, including our intellectual life—and thus *every aspect* needs to be redeemed. Nothing was left pristine and innocent. Even our minds are tempted to worship idols instead of the true God.

### *Serving Two Masters*

This analysis explains why Protestant thinkers have long argued that the medieval nature/grace dualism led to an incomplete view of the Fall. If only the upstairs fell, then the range of God's revelation and redemption is limited to the religious sphere. "By restricting the scope of fall and redemption to the supernatural," writes Herman Dooyeweerd, the nature/grace dualism robbed the Christian message of its integral, all-encompassing character, so that it "could no longer grip man with all its power and absoluteness." In practical terms, the nature/grace dualism implied that we need *spiritual* regeneration in the upper story of theology and religion, but we don't need *intellectual* regeneration in order to get the right view of politics, science, social life, morality, or work. In these areas, human reason is treated as religiously neutral, and we

can all go ahead and accept whatever the secular experts decree. It should come as no surprise, then, that this dichotomy led believers to accommodate with the world in these areas. (It also functioned as a stepping-stone to secularism, as we will see in the next chapter.)

Today many Catholic scholars have come to agree with this critique of the nature/grace dualism. For example, Louis Dupré notes that the dualistic scheme allowed *pure nature* (downstairs) to be conceived of as “independent of the historical stages of the fall and redemption.” And he praises Reformed theology for expressing “man’s *total* involvement in the drama of sin and redemption far more profound than the late medieval theologies with their dual vision of a supernatural order ‘added’ to nature.”<sup>58</sup>

We must never forget, however, that the same dualism permeated the Protestant denominations nearly as thoroughly as it did Catholicism. Because the Protestant Reformers did not craft an alternative philosophy to scholasticism (as we saw earlier), many of their followers slipped back into the same medieval nature/grace dualism. We see the effects today when Christians assume they can attend church and Bible study on the weekends and then, during the week, simply accept whatever concepts and theories are current in their professional field.

In practice, the notion that reason is religiously neutral means that secularism and naturalism are often promoted under the guise of “neutrality.” They are presented as objective, rational, and binding on everyone, while biblical views are dismissed as biased private opinions. This equivocation has created enormous pressure on Christians to abandon any distinctively biblical perspective in their professional work. One Christian philosopher goes so far as to insist that it would be “wrong” to apply biblical principles to his work: “I have, myself, definite religious convictions: but I would consider it entirely wrong to make them intrude as tacit presuppositions in the actual process of analysis I undertake.”<sup>59</sup> This scholar has clearly acquiesced to the idea that intellectual work can be autonomous of religious or philosophical commitments.

The effect of such a stance, however, is that Christians will abandon the world of ideas to the secularists. They will fail to see that secularism is itself a philosophical commitment—and that if they don’t bring *biblical* principles to bear on various issues, then they will end up promoting *nonbiblical* principles. It is impossible to think without some set of presuppositions about the world. This illustrates why it is crucial for Christians to understand the ongoing pitfalls of the nature/grace dualism—so that we can break free from faulty thought patterns and open our whole lives to the transforming power of God’s Word.

## ALL TOGETHER NOW

What we learn from this brief survey of theological traditions is that Creation, Fall, and Redemption are not only the fundamental turning points of biblical history—they also function as marvelously useful diagnostic tools. A genuinely biblical theology must keep all three principles in careful balance: that all created reality comes from the hand of God and was originally and intrinsically good; that all is marred and corrupted by sin; yet that all is capable of being redeemed, restored, and transformed by God's grace.

These three principles also provide a way to overcome the secular/sacred dichotomy in our lives. The biblical message is not just about some isolated part of life labeled "religion" or "church life." Creation, Fall, and Redemption are cosmic in scope, describing the great events that shape the nature of all created reality. We don't need to accept an inner fragmentation between our faith and the rest of life. Instead we can be integrally related to God on all levels of our being, offering up everything we do in love and service to Him. "Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God," Paul says (1 Cor. 10:31). The promise of Christianity is the joy and power of an integrated life, transformed on every level by the Holy Spirit, so that our whole being participates in the great drama of God's plan of redemption.

Yet when we work to overcome the long-standing secular/sacred dualism in the Christian world, our efforts will run up against powerful dualisms in the *secular* world as well, aimed at privatizing and marginalizing the biblical message. After all, in the West, secular thought grew out of the same stream of intellectual history that we have been surveying. The nature/grace dualism was simply secularized, producing the fact/value dichotomy that remains potent right up to our own times. To liberate Christianity from its cultural captivity, we need to diagnose the modern secular dualism as well. And that is what we will do in the next chapter.

## **Total Truth: Chapter Two Questions**

1. How does the Bible differ from Plato's view of the material world?
2. How did Augustine bring the two-story dichotomy into Christianity?
3. How did Thomas Aquinas try to resolve the two-story dichotomy?
4. What was the negative result of his "correction?"
5. How did the reformers resolve the two-story dichotomy?
6. Why did this correction not last in the Protestant movement?
7. How does each part of the three-part grid Creation-Fall-Redemption protect one from a two-story dichotomy worldview?
8. What are the effects of the two-story dichotomy in the Church today?