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—TOM PARSONS, www.twoorthree.net

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—JERRAM BARRS, Resident Scholar, Francis Schaeffer Institute,
Reformation 21

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—*Church Libraries Journal*

TOTAL TRUTH

*Liberating Christianity
from Its Cultural Captivity*

Study Guide Edition

NANCY R. PEARCEY

FOREWORD BY
Phillip E. Johnson

CROSSWAY BOOKS
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity (Study Guide Edition)

Copyright © 2004, 2005 by Nancy R. Pearcey

Published by Crossway Books,
a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers
1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

First edition 2004

Study Guide edition 2005

First trade paper edition 2008

Published in association with Yates & Yates, LLP, Attorneys and Counselors,
Orange, California.

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Cover photo: “Le Semeur 1” http://www.kmm.nl/index_flash.html#voorpagina

First printing 2008

Printed in the United States of America

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ISBN 978-1-4335-0220-8

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Pearcey, Nancy.

Total truth: liberating Christianity from its cultural captivity / Nancy R.

Pearcey ; foreword by Phillip E. Johnson. — Study guide ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 13: 978-1-58134-746-3

ISBN 10: 1-58134-746-4 (hc : alk. paper)

1. Christianity—Philosophy. 2. Apologetics. 3. Christian life.
4. History—Religious aspects—Christianity. 5. History—Philosophy.

I. Title.

BR100.P37 2005

261—dc22

2005011392

DP	18	17	16	15	14	13	12	11	10	09	08		
14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

FOREWORD

When Nancy Pearcey invited me to write a foreword for her “worldview” book, I hastened to accept the honor. I was honored by the invitation because this is a book of unusual importance by an author of unusual ability.

It has been a treat for me to read and study the manuscript, and I feel that I am doing a great favor to every potential reader whom I can persuade to enjoy these pages as I have done. Nancy Pearcey is an author who is greatly respected by all who know her work. I hope that, with this book, she will receive the acclaim that her thought and writing has so long deserved, and that readers will find in its message of liberation the key to intellectual and spiritual renewal.

It would be an understatement to say that worldview is an important topic. I would rather say that understanding how worldviews are formed, and how they guide or confine thought, is the essential step toward understanding everything else. Understanding worldview is a bit like trying to see the lens of one’s own eye. We do not ordinarily see our own worldview, but we see everything else by looking through it. Put simply, our worldview is the window by which we view the world, and decide, often subconsciously, what is real and important, or unreal and unimportant.

It may be that a worldview is commonly a collection of prejudices. If so, the prejudices are necessary, because we can’t start from a blank slate and investigate everything from scratch by ourselves. When somebody tells me that he receives guidance from God in prayer, or that science is our only way of knowing anything for sure, or that there is no objective difference between good and evil, I need to have some verifiable frame of reference to tell me at once whether he is merely deluded or is saying something that is sufficiently sensible to merit serious consideration.

Similarly, when I tell my fellow Berkeley professors that I don’t believe the theory of evolution, I need to know why they find it so difficult to take me seriously or to believe that my objection to the theory is based on scientific evidence rather than on the book of Genesis. The reason is that evolution with its accompanying philosophy is identified with their worldview at such a deep level that they cannot imagine how the theory could possibly be contrary to the evidence.

Every one of us has a worldview, and our worldview governs our thinking even when—or especially when—we are unaware of it. Thus, it is not uncommon to find well-meaning evildoers, as it were, who are quite sincerely convinced that they are Christians, and attend church faithfully, and may even hold a position of leadership, but who have absorbed a worldview that makes it easy for them to ignore their Christian principles when it comes time to do the practical business of daily living. Their sincerely held Christian principles are in one mental category for them, and practical decision making is in another. Such persons can believe that Jesus is coming again to judge the world and yet live as if the standards of this world are the only thing that needs to be taken into account.

Likewise, Christian education is likely to be an exercise in futility if it does not prepare our young people to confront and survive the worldview challenges that they will surely meet as soon as they leave the security of the Christian home, and probably even while they are still living at home and being educated in a Christian environment, due to the pervasive influence of the media and the Internet. For example, a youngster may be taught very fine Christian principles, but he or she may also grow up understanding that these principles fit into a specialized category called “religious belief.”

Sooner or later, that youngster will find out that secular college professors, and sometimes even Christian professors, proceed from an implicit assumption that religious beliefs are the kind of thing one is supposed to set aside when learning how the world really works, and that it is usually praiseworthy to “grow” gradually away from those beliefs as a part of the normal process of maturing.

Why do those professors think that? Of course they are being influenced by the dominant belief system in their academic culture, which is also the culture of the newsroom at most daily newspapers or television stations. But just to say that people are influenced by their cultural environment does not explain how our culture has come to be the way it is, when it used to be very different. To survive in modern or postmodern American culture without being overwhelmed by its concealed prejudices, everyone needs to know how to recognize those prejudices, to understand what kind of thinking brought them into existence, and to be able to explain to ourselves and others what is wrong with the pervasive assumptions that often come labeled only as “the way all rational people think,” and that will swamp our faith if we are not alert to them.

A fine education in worldview analysis is as basic an element of a modern Christian’s defense system as a shield was in the days when a prudent traveler needed to be prepared to repel an attack by sword-wielding robbers. Today the

intellectual brigands rob unwary youths of their faith, and they do it with arguments based on the shifting sand of “what everybody knows” and “the way we think today.” Those youths need to find the solid rock, and they need to know both why the rock is solid, and why the world prefers the shifting sand.

Only a very gifted author is capable of writing a book about worldview analysis that will make exciting reading for the ordinary person, but which is also sufficiently informed by scholarship to convey a deep understanding of the subject rather than merely a superficial acquaintance. Everyone is aware that American culture changed enormously during the twentieth century, but very few people understand how the change was brought about by ideas and habits that seemed at first to be eccentric or of only minor importance, but that eventually crept into the popular culture and proved to be almost irresistible. The situation we find ourselves in today has deep roots in the thinking of earlier times. Conduct that not very long ago was regarded as perverse or criminal has become not only tolerated but the new norm. Those who dare to disapprove of that conduct, or just fail to applaud the new norm with sufficient enthusiasm, are themselves likely to feel the full weight of society’s disapproval. The change in conduct was brought about by changes in worldview, which caused those who followed the new fashions to think differently.

With that much of an introduction, I invite you to read Nancy Pearcey. You will find not only pleasant reading but all the elements and basic information necessary to produce a Christian mind with a map of reality that really works. When Christian parents, pastors, educators, and other leaders learn to give this subject the importance it deserves, and to practice it even as they teach it thoroughly in the home, from the pulpit, and in every classroom, then Christians will find that they are no longer fearful and timid when they have to address claims of worldly wisdom. So let’s get started.

—Phillip E. Johnson
Berkeley, California
January 2004

Christianity is not a series of truths in the plural,
but rather truth spelled with a capital “T.”
Truth about total reality, not just about religious things.

Biblical Christianity is Truth concerning total reality —
and the intellectual holding of that total Truth
and then living in the light of that Truth.

FRANCIS SCHAEFFER

Address at the University of Notre Dame

April 1981

INTRODUCTION

Your earlier book says Christians are called to redeem entire cultures, not just individuals,” a schoolteacher commented, joining me for lunch at a conference where I had just spoken. Then he added thoughtfully, “I’d never heard that before.”

The teacher was talking about *How Now Shall We Live?*¹ and at his words I looked up from my plate in surprise. Was he really saying he’d never even *heard* the idea of being a redemptive force in every area of culture? He shook his head: “No, I’ve always thought of salvation strictly in terms of individual souls.”

That conversation helped confirm my decision to write a follow-up book dealing with the worldview themes in *How Now Shall We Live?* Just a few years ago, when I began my work on that earlier volume, using the term *worldview* was not on anyone’s list of good conversation openers. To tell people that you were writing a book on *worldview* was to risk glazed stares and a quick change in subject. But today as I travel around the country, I sense an eagerness among evangelicals to move beyond a purely privatized faith, applying biblical principles to areas like work, business, and politics. Flip open any number of Christian publications and you’re likely to find half a dozen advertisements for *worldview* conferences, *worldview* institutes, and *worldview* programs. Clearly the term itself has strong marketing cachet these days, which signals a deep hunger among Christians for an overarching framework to bring unity to their lives.

This book addresses that hunger and offers new direction for advancing the worldview movement. It will help you identify the secular/sacred divide that keeps your faith locked into the private sphere of “religious truth.” It will walk you through practical, workable steps for crafting a Christian worldview in your own life and work. And it will teach you how to apply a worldview grid to cut through the bewildering maze of ideas and ideologies we encounter in a postmodern world. The purpose of worldview studies is nothing less than to liberate Christianity from its cultural captivity, unleashing its power to transform the world.

“The gospel is like a caged lion,” said the great Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon. “It does not need to be defended, it just needs to be let out of its cage.” Today the cage is our accommodation to the secular/sacred split that

reduces Christianity to a matter of private personal belief. To unlock the cage, we need to become utterly convinced that, as Francis Schaeffer said, Christianity is not merely religious truth, it is total truth—truth about the whole of reality.

POLITICS IS NOT ENOUGH

The reason a worldview message is so compelling today is that we are still emerging from the fundamentalist era of the early twentieth century. Up until that time, evangelicals had enjoyed a position of cultural dominance in America. But after the Scopes trial and the rise of theological modernism, religious conservatives turned in on themselves: They circled the wagons, developed a fortress mentality, and championed “separatism” as a positive strategy. Then, in the 1940s and 50s, a movement began that aimed at breaking out of the fortress. Calling themselves *neo-evangelicals*, this group argued that we are called not to escape the surrounding culture but to engage it. They sought to construct a redemptive vision that would embrace not only individuals but also social structures and institutions.

Yet many evangelicals lacked the conceptual tools needed for the task, which has seriously limited their success. For example, in recent decades many Christians have responded to the moral and social decline in American society by embracing political activism. Believers are running for office in growing numbers; churches are organizing voter registration; public policy groups are proliferating; scores of Christian publications and radio programs offer commentary on public affairs. This heightened activism has yielded good results in many areas of public life, yet the impact remains far less than most had hoped. Why? Because evangelicals often put all their eggs in one basket: They leaped into political activism as the quickest, surest way to make a difference in the public arena—failing to realize that politics tends to reflect culture, not the other way around.

Nothing illustrates evangelicals’ infatuation with politics more clearly than a story related by a Christian lawyer. Considering whether to take a job in the nation’s capital, he consulted with the leader of a Washington-area ministry, who told him, “You can either stay where you are and keep practicing law, or you can come to Washington and *change the culture*.” The implication was that the only way to effect cultural change was through national politics. Today, battle-weary political warriors have grown more realistic about the limits of that strategy. We have learned that “politics is downstream from culture, not the other way around,” says Bill Wichterman, policy advisor to Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist. “Real change has to start with the culture. All we

can do on Capitol Hill is try to find ways government can nurture healthy cultural trends.”²

On a similar note, a member of Congress once told me, “I got involved in politics after the 1973 abortion decision because I thought that was the fastest route to moral reform. Well, we’ve won some legislative victories, but *we’ve lost the culture*.” The most effective work, he had come to realize, is done by ordinary Christians fulfilling God’s calling to reform culture within their local spheres of influence—their families, churches, schools, neighborhoods, workplaces, professional organizations, and civic institutions. In order to effect lasting change, the congressman concluded, “we need to develop a Christian worldview.”

LOSING OUR CHILDREN

Not only have we “lost the culture,” but we continue losing even our own children. It’s a familiar but tragic story that devout young people, raised in Christian homes, head off to college and abandon their faith. Why is this pattern so common? Largely because young believers have not been taught how to develop a biblical worldview. Instead, Christianity has been restricted to a specialized area of religious belief and personal devotion.

I recently read a striking example. At a Christian high school, a theology teacher strode to the front of the classroom, where he drew a heart on one side of the blackboard and a brain on the other. The two are as divided as the two sides of the blackboard, he told the class: The heart is what we use for religion, while the brain is what we use for science.

An apocryphal story? A caricature of Christian anti-intellectualism? No, the story was told by a young woman who was in the class that day. Worse, out of some two hundred students, she was the only one who objected. The rest apparently found nothing unusual about restricting religion to the domain of the “heart.”³

As Christian parents, pastors, teachers, and youth group leaders, we constantly see young people pulled down by the undertow of powerful cultural trends. If all we give them is a “heart” religion, it will not be strong enough to counter the lure of attractive but dangerous ideas. Young believers also need a “brain” religion—training in worldview and apologetics—to equip them to analyze and critique the competing worldviews they will encounter when they leave home. If forewarned and forearmed, young people at least have a fighting chance when they find themselves a minority of one among their classmates or work colleagues. Training young people to develop a Christian mind is no longer an option; it is part of their necessary survival equipment.

HEART VERSUS BRAIN

The first step in forming a Christian worldview is to overcome this sharp divide between “heart” and “brain.” We have to reject the division of life into a sacred realm, limited to things like worship and personal morality, over against a secular realm that includes science, politics, economics, and the rest of the public arena. This dichotomy in our own minds is the greatest barrier to liberating the power of the gospel across the whole of culture today.

Moreover, it is reinforced by a much broader division rending the entire fabric of modern society—what sociologists call the public/private split. “Modernization brings about a novel dichotomization of social life,” writes Peter Berger. “The dichotomy is between the huge and immensely powerful institutions of the public sphere [by this he means the state, academia, large corporations] . . . and the private sphere”—the realm of family, church, and personal relationships.

The large public institutions claim to be “scientific” and “value-free,” which means that values are relegated to the private sphere of personal choice. As Berger explains: “The individual is left to his own devices in a wide range of activities that are crucial to the formation of a meaningful identity, from expressing his religious preference to settling on a sexual life style.”⁴ We might diagram the dichotomy like this:

Modern societies are sharply divided:

PRIVATE SPHERE

Personal Preferences

PUBLIC SPHERE

Scientific Knowledge

In short, the private sphere is awash in moral relativism. Notice Berger’s telling phrase “religious preference.” Religion is not considered an objective truth to which we *submit*, but only a matter of personal taste which we *choose*. Because of this, the dichotomy is sometimes called the fact/value split.

Values have been reduced to arbitrary, existential decisions:

VALUES

Individual Choice

FACTS

Binding on Everyone

As Schaeffer explains, the concept of truth itself has been divided—a process he illustrates with the imagery of a two-story building: In the lower story are science and reason, which are considered public truth, binding on everyone. Over against it is an upper story of noncognitive experience, which is the locus of personal meaning. This is the realm of private truth, where we hear people say, “That may be true for you but it’s not true for me.”⁵

The two-realm theory of truth:

UPPER STORY

Nonrational, Noncognitive

LOWER STORY

Rational, Verifiable

When Schaeffer was writing, the term *postmodernism* had not yet been coined, but clearly that is what he was talking about. Today we might say that in the lower story is modernism, which still claims to have universal, objective truth—while in the upper story is postmodernism.

Today’s two-story truth:

POSTMODERNISM

Subjective, Relative to Particular Groups

MODERNISM

Objective, Universally Valid

The reason it’s so important for us to learn how to recognize this division is that it is the single most potent weapon for delegitimizing the biblical perspective in the public square today. Here’s how it works: Most secularists are too politically savvy to attack religion directly or to debunk it as false. So what do they do? They consign religion to the *value* sphere—which takes it out of the realm of true and false altogether. Secularists can then assure us that of course they “respect” religion, while at the same time denying that it has any relevance to the public realm.

As Phillip Johnson puts it, the fact/value split “allows the metaphysical naturalists to mollify the potentially troublesome religious people by assuring them that science does not rule out ‘religious *belief*’ (so long as it does not pretend to be *knowledge*).⁶” In other words, so long as everyone understands that

it is merely a matter of private feelings. The two-story grid functions as a gatekeeper that defines what is to be taken seriously as genuine knowledge, and what can be dismissed as mere wish-fulfillment.

JUST A POWER GRAB?

This same division also explains why Christians have such difficulty communicating in the public arena. It's crucial for us to realize that nonbelievers are constantly filtering what we say through a mental fact/value grid. For example, when we state a position on an issue like abortion or bioethics or homosexuality, *we* intend to assert an objective moral truth important to the health of society—but *they* think we're merely expressing our subjective bias. When we say there's scientific evidence for design in the universe, *we* intend to stake out a testable truth claim—but *they* say, "Uh oh, the Religious Right is making a political power grab." The fact/value grid instantly dissolves away the objective content of anything we say, and we will not be successful in introducing the *content* of our belief into the public discussion unless we first find ways to get past this gatekeeper.

That's why Lesslie Newbigin warned that the divided concept of truth is the primary factor in "the cultural captivity of the gospel." It traps Christianity in the upper story of privatized values, and prevents it from having any effect on public culture.⁷ Having worked as a missionary in India for forty years, Newbigin was able to discern what is distinctive about Western thought more clearly than most of us, who have been immersed in it all our lives. On his return to the West, Newbigin was struck by the way Christian truth has been marginalized. He saw that any position labeled *religion* is placed in the upper story of values, where it is no longer regarded as objective knowledge.

To give just one recent example, in the debate over embryonic stem cell research, actor Christopher Reeve told a student group at Yale University, "When matters of public policy are debated, *no religions should have a seat at the table.*"⁸

To recover a place at the table of public debate, then, Christians must find a way to overcome the dichotomy between public and private, fact and value, secular and sacred. We need to liberate the gospel from its cultural captivity, restoring it to the status of public truth. "The barred cage that forms the prison for the gospel in contemporary western culture is [the church's] accommodation . . . to the fact-value dichotomy," says Michael Goheen, a professor of worldview studies.⁹ Only by recovering a holistic view of total truth can we set the gospel free to become a redemptive force across all of life.

MENTAL MAPS

To say that Christianity is the truth about total reality means that it is a full-orbed worldview. The term means literally a *view* of the *world*, a biblically informed perspective on all reality. A worldview is like a mental map that tells us how to navigate the world effectively. It is the imprint of God's objective truth on our inner life.

We might say that each of us carries a model of the universe inside our heads that tells us what the world is like and how we should live in it. A classic book on worldviews is titled *The Universe Next Door*, suggesting that we all have a mental or conceptual universe in which we “live”—a network of principles that answer the fundamental questions of life: Who are we? Where did we come from? What is the purpose of life? The author of the book, James Sire, invites readers to examine a variety of worldviews in order to understand the mental universe held by other people—those living “next door.”

A worldview is not the same thing as a formal philosophy; otherwise, it would be only for professional philosophers. Even ordinary people have a set of convictions about how reality functions and how they should live. Because we are made in God's image, we all seek to make sense of life. Some convictions are conscious, while others are unconscious, but together they form a more or less consistent picture of reality. Human beings “are incapable of holding purely arbitrary opinions or making entirely unprincipled decisions,” writes Al Wolters in a book on worldview. Because we are by nature rational and responsible beings, we sense that “we need some creed to live by, some map by which to chart our course.”¹⁰

The notion that we need such a “map” in the first place grows out of the biblical view of human nature. The Marxist may claim that human behavior is ultimately shaped by economic circumstances; the Freudian attributes everything to repressed sexual instincts; and the behavioral psychologist regards humans as stimulus-response mechanisms. But the Bible teaches that the overriding factor in the choices we make is our ultimate belief or religious commitment. Our lives are shaped by the “god” we worship—whether the God of the Bible or some substitute deity.

The term *worldview* is a translation of the German word *Weltanschauung*, which means a way of looking at the world (*Welt* = world; *schauen* = to look). Philosophical idealism developed the idea that cultures are complex wholes, where a certain outlook on life, or spirit of the age, is expressed across the board—in art, literature, and social institutions as well as in formal philosophy. The best way to understand the products of any culture, then, is to grasp the underlying worldview being expressed. But, of course, cultures change over

the course of history, and thus the original use of the term *worldview* conveyed relativism.

The word was later introduced into Christian circles through Dutch neo-Calvinist thinkers such as Abraham Kuyper and Herman Dooyeweerd. They argued that Christians cannot counter the spirit of the age in which they live unless they develop an equally comprehensive biblical worldview—an outlook on life that gives rise to distinctively Christian forms of culture—with the important qualification that it is not merely the relativistic belief of a particular culture but is based on the very Word of God, true for all times and places.¹¹

NOT JUST ACADEMIC

As the concept of *worldview* becomes common currency, it can all too easily be misunderstood. Some treat it as merely another academic subject to master—a mental exercise or “how to” strategy. Others handle worldview as if it were a weapon in the culture war, a tool for more effective activism. Still others, alas, treat it as little more than a new buzzword or marketing gimmick to dazzle the public and attract donors.

Genuine worldview thinking is far more than a mental strategy or a new spin on current events. At the core, it is a deepening of our spiritual character and the character of our lives. It begins with the submission of our minds to the Lord of the universe—a willingness to be taught by Him. The driving force in worldview studies should be a commitment to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind” (see Luke 10:27).

That’s why the crucial condition for intellectual growth is *spiritual* growth, asking God for the grace to “take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). God is not just the Savior of souls, He is also the Lord of creation. One way we acknowledge His Lordship is by interpreting every aspect of creation in the light of His truth. God’s Word becomes a set of glasses offering a new perspective on all our thoughts and actions.

As with every aspect of sanctification, the renewal of the mind may be painful and difficult. It requires hard work and discipline, inspired by a sacrificial love for Christ and a burning desire to build up His Body, the Church. In order to have the mind of Christ, we must be willing to be crucified with Christ, following wherever He might lead—whatever the cost. “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). As we undergo refining in the fires of suffering, our desires are purified and we find ourselves wanting nothing more than to bend every fiber of our being, including our mental powers, to fulfill the Lord’s Prayer: “Thy Kingdom come.” We yearn to lay all our talents and gifts at His feet in order to advance His purposes in

the world. Developing a Christian worldview means submitting our entire self to God, in an act of devotion and service to Him.

WORLDVIEW TRAINING

This book approaches the topic of worldview by weaving together insights from three strands.¹² Part 1 sheds light on the secular/sacred dichotomy that restricts Christianity to the realm of religious truth, creating double minds and fragmented lives. To find personal wholeness, we must be willing to lay bare all aspects of our work and life to God's direction and power. Worldview thinking proves to be a rich avenue to joy and fulfillment—a means of letting the spark of God's truth light up every nook and cranny of our lives.

This section also provides practical, hands-on worldview training. It will walk you through concrete steps for crafting a biblically based worldview in any field using the structural elements of Creation, Fall, and Redemption. It will also give you an opportunity to practice apologetics by analyzing non-Christian worldviews. After all, every philosophy or ideology has to answer the same fundamental questions:

1. CREATION: How did it all begin? Where did we come from?
2. FALL: What went wrong? What is the source of evil and suffering?
3. REDEMPTION: What can we do about it? How can the world be set right again?

By applying this simple grid, we can identify nonbiblical worldviews, and then analyze where they go wrong.

Part 2 zeroes in on Creation, the foundational starting point for any worldview. In the West, the reigning creation myth is Darwinian evolution; thus, no matter what our field of work is, we must begin by critiquing Darwinism—both its scientific claims and its worldview implications. In this section, you will discover how the latest findings of science discredit naturalistic theories of evolution, while supporting the concept of Intelligent Design. You may also be surprised to learn how aggressively Darwinism has been extended far beyond the bounds of science, even reconfiguring America's social and legal institutions—with devastating effects.

Part 3 peers into the looking glass of history to ask *why* evangelicals do not have a strong worldview tradition. Why is the secular/sacred dichotomy so pervasive? Here we step back from the present to take a tour of the history

and heritage of evangelicalism in America. By rummaging about in the attic of our past, we can diagnose the way inherited patterns of thought continue to shape our own thinking today. We can learn how to identify self-defeating barriers to worldview thinking and how to overcome them.

Part 4 reminds us that the heart of worldview thinking lies in its practical and personal application. The renewal of our minds comes about only through the submission of our whole selves to the Lordship of Christ. We must be willing to sit at the feet of Jesus and be taught by Him, as Mary of Bethany did, realizing that only “one thing is necessary” (Luke 10:42). Given our fallen human nature, we typically do not really *sit* before the Lord until our legs are knocked out from under us by crises—sorrow, loss, or injustice. It is only when stripped of our personal dreams and ambitions that we truly die to our own agendas. Union with Christ in His death and resurrection is the only path to sanctification of both heart and mind—to being conformed to the likeness of Christ.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is a joyful task to express gratitude to those whose ideas and lives have helped shape this book’s message. Foremost is Francis Schaeffer, through whose ministry I returned to the Christian faith I had rejected as a teenager. After my first visit to L’Abri (described in chapter 1), I returned a year later for another round of study, when I also met the young man who became my husband. Later we both earned degrees at Covenant Seminary in St. Louis, where Schaeffer once taught. For further graduate studies we attended the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto, where we were steeped in the philosophy of Dutch Reformed thinkers like Kuyper and Dooyeweerd, whose ideas were seminal for *How Now Shall We Live?* especially its overall framework of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration. The same background will be evident to readers of this present book as well, and by making frequent references to the original writings, I hope to inspire readers to discover these rich resources for themselves.

Second, I owe much to Dr. Phillip Johnson, professor emeritus of law at the University of California at Berkeley, who provides strategic leadership for the Intelligent Design movement. I have known Phil since 1990, when I interviewed him for the *Bible-Science Newsletter*,¹³ and his original way of framing the argument for design has revolutionized the origins debate. His name likewise appears frequently throughout the text, in order to direct readers to his original works.

In my early years as a young Christian, Denis and Margie Haack (founders

of Ransom Fellowship) provided crucial support and stability. At Covenant Seminary, I benefited especially from the fine teaching of Dr. David Jones. At the Institute for Christian Studies, a year-long course on neo-Platonism demonstrated that Dr. Al Wolters has a rare gift for bringing ancient Greek philosophy to life. I also had the privilege of taking the last class on neo-Calvinist philosophy taught by Dr. Bernard Zylstra before his untimely death from cancer.

I am grateful to my uncle Bill Overn, a brilliant physicist, whose recommendation helped open a position for me at the *Bible-Science Newsletter* in 1977, where I worked for thirteen years, writing in-depth monthly articles for a section titled “Worldview” on the relation between science and Christian worldview. These lengthy articles traced the impact of evolutionary concepts on education, psychology, law, Marxism, sexuality, New Age religion, and much more—material that later formed the basis for much of my contribution to *How Now Shall We Live?*¹⁴ as well as the present book.

The material for this book was honed through interaction with various audiences, and I would like to thank the following groups: World Journalism Institute and its director Bob Case; Faith and Law (a fellowship of congressional staffers); the *How Now Shall We Live?* reading groups on Capitol Hill; the Megaviews Forum at Los Alamos National Laboratory and its cofounder, former U.S. Congressman Bill Redmond; Regent University School of Law; L’Abri in Rochester, Minnesota; the Association of Christian Schools International; the Renaissance Group (Christian artists and entertainers); Christian Schools International; Trinity Forum Academy; and several Christian colleges and universities. I have also benefited from the opportunity to address events organized by Christian campus groups at Princeton, Dartmouth, Ohio State University, UC Santa Barbara, the University of Minnesota, and USC. Special thanks to John Mark Reynolds, director of the Torrey Honors Institute at Biola University, who invited me to give seminars on the book when it was still in manuscript form, and to the students who contributed by their feedback and comments.

I wish to thank the Discovery Institute’s Center for Science and Culture and its director Steve Meyer for a grant that underwrote the initial research stage of the book. The center’s staff and fellows form a highly professional group of scientists and scholars who inspire and inform one another’s work in countless ways.

I am grateful to those who read or discussed sections of the manuscript: Ila Anderson, Lael Arrington, Michael Behe, Katie Braden, David Calhoun, Bob and Kathy Case, Nancy Chan, Roy Clouser, Jim DeKorne, Michael Goheen, Os Guinness, Darryl Hart, Dana Hill, David Jones, Ranald Macaulay, George Marsden, Tim McGrew, Steven Meyer, Udo Middelman, Kathleen

Nielson, J. I. Packer, Dieter Pearcey, Dorothy Randolph, Karl Randolph, Jay Richards, Jim Skillen, John Vander Stelt, Tyrone Walters, Linda McGinn Waterman, Richard Weikart, and Al Wolters.

It is an honor to have as my agent Sealy Yates, a man of enormous integrity and a servant's heart. The publisher of Crossway Books, Lane Dennis, along with his wife, Ebeth, welcomed the book project with prayerful enthusiasm from the beginning. Many thanks to the Crossway staff, especially vice president Marvin Padgett and editor Bill Deckard.

The deepest gratitude is due, as always, to family. Thanks to my parents, who sacrificed greatly to send their children to Lutheran schools. I owe an unspeakable debt to my husband, Rick, whose unflagging support, professional editorial expertise, and background in worldview studies contribute to a fruitful writing partnership. The perspective he developed through years of editorial experience on Capitol Hill keeps me grounded in the real world. Finally, I dedicate the book to my two sons, Dieter and Michael, in the hope that they will craft a Christian worldview in their own fields of work, liberating the gospel's power to transform their lives and their world.

—Nancy Randolph Pearcey
Lake Ridge, Virginia
March 2004