

Paganism

The word “pagan” doesn’t appear in our English bibles. It’s a word deriving from Latin, meaning “country people.” I surmise the word was used contemptuously by the cosmopolitan city-dwellers of the ancient Roman Empire, referring to the unsophisticates who dwelt outside their cities. The *idea* of pagan, though, appears in the Hebrew Scriptures, referring to the idolatrous, ungodly people of the Gentile nations. (See for example the use of the Hebrew *goy* and *goyim* in Isaiah 37:12.) But the word has acquired a more specific meaning in modern English. It refers to, according to my dictionary, “people who are polytheistic or ‘have little or no religion at all’ [an impossibility; all humans are deeply religious, but thus reads the entry in my Webster’s], and who delight in sensual pleasures and material goods; hedonistic people.” (Hedonism means seeking pleasure or happiness as the main value in life.) This is a good beginning, but I think the word encompasses far more than just what the dictionary states. We should understand all that paganism is because, as I shall argue here, our evangelical churches are saturated with it.

For this discussion, we also need to understand “worldview.” Everyone has a worldview. *Everyone*. Worldview is a grid or framework we hold subconsciously by which we interpret everything in life. A worldview inevitably forms in our minds as we experience reality. It is based on certain assumptions that we hold, and it can change from time to time as our assumptions change. And our worldview controls our thinking and our conduct. It is pervasive, yet we are almost entirely unaware that it’s there. A Christian worldview develops (or *should* develop) out of the Bible; it holds to the worldview of the authors of Scripture and their writings; it is the worldview that God intends for His people. Needless to say, it is a pre-modern worldview. We today don’t have a Christian worldview because we don’t know that that’s what we should have and we certainly don’t commit to forming one. By default, therefore, we have a pagan worldview.

Our worldview consists of our values, desires, loves, beliefs, hopes, and ideas about things, events and people. A part of any worldview is a grand narrative or story, one that we hold subconsciously, about all that exists and our relationship to it and how we should live. We think *with* our worldview, but not *about* our worldview. Thus we’re not aware of it. We use our worldview all the time, unknowingly; no one is “neutral” in their thinking. We even interpret Scripture with, or through, our worldview, which means our worldview controls even how we understand Scripture.

In modern Christianity, we think that right “belief” is what matters. OK, but let’s not deceive ourselves. Our worldview determines even what we understand “belief” is, and our worldview controls what behaviors (if any) our beliefs result in. Modern American Christianity is really Christo-paganism. It’s a pagan worldview (and a resulting pagan character and lifestyle) loosely connected to a set of Bible-based beliefs.

Let’s try now to understand a pagan worldview. This is a huge topic, but I think that we can see what’s important here in my limited space.

- Pagans love freedom from authority. *All* authority. They want to live licentiously, that is, as they please, without restraints. For this reason they refuse to acknowledge the existence of God because to them, God means both limitations and demands, and they don’t want either. Their view of liberty is absolute. It means they arrogate the right to decide what’s right and what’s wrong, what’s moral and what isn’t. They reject all responsibilities except those they can’t avoid or those that are in some way self-satisfying. They refuse to be accountable for the way they live and so assume (irrationally) that there will be no such accountability. Related to this is a rejection of truth, because truth is really an authority. So pagans fill their lives with opinions and speculations, myths and lies.
- Pagans are self-absorbed. They’re in love with themselves. They therefore cannot love anyone else; it’s impossible. Any love they claim to have is impure and selfish. Self-love necessarily results in

indifference toward others, if not strife, contempt for others, or overt violence. And it results in a life of self-indulgence. Pride is one way that self-love is expressed. Another way is vengefulness.

- The pagan understanding of life is, it's to enjoy it, to be happy. They insist that this life is the only existence there is, so they demand the right to enjoy it in whatever way they please. So they pursue whatever makes them happy. The will to be happy necessarily means there can be no absolutes of any kind; everything must be "relative," which means we decide all issues in such a way that doesn't threaten our enjoyment of life. Similarly, one's character isn't important, nor are ideas or beliefs (even strongly held ones), except to the extent that they add enjoyment to life. Self-righteousness powerfully reinforces one's happiness. Sensual pleasures especially make life enjoyable. They don't merely practice sexual perversions, they celebrate them. Pagans *despise* suffering.
- Pagans are nationalistic. It's termed tribalism. Pagans fiercely identify with others of their own kind and have powerfully negative attitudes towards outsiders. It's not so much that they fear others or are threatened by them as it is a sense of bonding to those who have the same traditions and values, the same skin color, the same language and facial features, etc. But going deeper into this, I suspect that what's at issue is having the same core assumptions, beliefs and worldview. Those who differ on this key aspect are alien and to be shunned. Patriotism is one way that this nationalism, this group identity, is expressed.
- Pagans believe in a mechanistic world. Everything in nature progresses autonomously according to certain laws of physics. Yes, there may be supernatural beings, gods, and those gods may strongly influence nature, or there may even be a God, but that doesn't change their core assumption about the cosmos. Nature exists and works mechanically, like a machine. It's impersonal. To some pagans, "god" is the force that makes nature operate; they're pantheists. If there is a God, pagans are OK with knowing about Him, but they don't know Him and don't *want* to know Him. If there are gods, they're there to serve us, not we them. Pagans are fatalistic; nature is in control, even of our lives.
- Pagans are religious. They incorporate superstitions and magic into their idolatrous religion without the slightest embarrassment. They observe certain special places, events, and people, perhaps even as sacred. Christmas is one such special day. Scientists are the priests in the religion of scientism. Philosophers and certain intellectuals are the priests in the religion of humanism. They may attend church or synagogue (or mosque) for a sense of the transcendent. They may even believe in Jesus, that He existed and died on a cross, but that's entirely an intellectual matter. And their religion never will restrict their liberty or otherwise interfere with any other aspect of their worldview or their life.
- Pagans are crassly materialistic. They love their goods and properties, their money and all that it can buy. They covet ever more things because they believe that material goods enhance a life. Knowledge for the sake of knowing things likewise might be in this category. Experiences too; they are always seeking thrills and excitement. Pagans are ambitious too. They cannot experience peace and contentment; it forever escapes them.
- Pagans have no sense of purpose in life. They may posit this or that ideal or value as of over-riding importance, but only for the sake of appearances or to enhance a belief in their own virtue. They have no sincerely held sense of purpose in life, and they don't want one.

There's lots more, of course, but this much suffices. I have listed the above to argue that many or most of these features of a pagan worldview are held by those who claim to be Christians. If we're honest and reflect on our lives and values, we'd have to agree. Very few of us hold to a biblical worldview, which is totally contrary to every aspect of the pagan worldview. Few of us even know what a biblical worldview is. And if we do know, it's an intellectual concept, not something to live. A pagan worldview is the default way of life, and it's inimical to a biblical one, at enmity to God.

We must deliberately, sedulously craft a biblical worldview and then live it, to the glory of Christ. See Ephesians 2:1ff, for example. It's impossible to describe here what it might look like, for that would occupy an entire book. A comprehensive worldview, after all, should encompass such areas as medicine and health, animals and the environment, law and business, politics and government, recreation and entertainment, work and money, war, debt, science, marriage, sexuality, and other religions. To form such a worldview requires years of Bible study and theological reflection. But the fundamentals that would inform a biblical worldview are as follows:

- The singular, climactic event in all history is the irruption of God in His creation. The incarnation of the Son and His self-sacrificing, substitutionary atonement, resurrection and ascension, and promise to return and rule, morally compel us to commit our lives to Him. God invites us to dwell with Him, in His ineffable presence forever, enjoying the blessings of being with Him. Christ came to take us to God.
- While still here, we are slaves to Christ. We've been called to love and exalt Him, and we do that by obediently following His commands and teachings, documented in Scripture. The only alternative is being in bondage to sin, as all pagans inescapably are. We all – *everyone!* – must serve someone. Only by serving Christ are we free from sin and from Satan's iron grip. How do we serve Christ? By obeying Scripture. Let's get this: If we love Jesus and seek to honor Him with our lives, He gives us the Holy Spirit to enable us to be changed to be like Him and to do as He wills. *This* is Christianity.
- Our desire must be God, to know Him, to glorify Him, and to be with Him. And if we love God, we'll be changed into God-like beings, into a new humanity, a unique people filled with God's transcending love, people who also love other people. God's love transforms us. It makes us humble. It allows us to forgive others' offenses. It impels us to live righteously (as God defines righteousness).
- Our purpose in this life is to exalt the Son. This was Mary's desire (Luke 1:46) and it fulfills Psalm 2. It's basically the reason the Scriptures have been given to us. We exalt the Son by knowing (from the Word) His will, His character, His values, and then making them our own. We may need to suffer in this present life, perhaps horribly. Suffering is how we participate in the life of Jesus, the Suffering Servant of God. Following Jesus will certainly entail sacrifice and loss. But we will be raised to a new existence of infinite joy and peace in the presence of the eternal God, and *that* is (or should be) our great hope, what we live for. We're here to follow Jesus, to honor Him with our lives.
- We identify with Jesus the Second Adam. He came to seek those of the First Adam who will to be with Him in the Messianic Kingdom, from among Gentiles as well as from among Israel. Our work is to continue doing that in all the world, and we do it in God's love. Our concern is (or should be) all people from whatever tribe or nation they're found.
- Jesus is Lord. That means He's deity. All authority has been given to Him, in heaven and on earth. He has minute-by-minute control of all – *all* – that happens in this cosmos, His creation. This is biblical cosmology, it is revealed truth. He also has authority over all humans, which means that we're accountable to Him for how we are, how we live, what we think, what we love. He will judge us, and the basis of that judgment is His revealed Word.
- Christians worship Jesus by honoring Him, and that's by obeying and serving Him, by being just like Him, regardless what sacrifice is entailed. The Christian "religion" (if that's what we must call it) is a Person, the Jewish Messiah, Jesus. It's an intimate, personal relationship with Jesus, whom we love. We were created to glorify God, and in this era of the Son, we glorify God by following Jesus.
- Our union with Christ means we participate with Him in His life, death, resurrection and ascension. And His future return to reign. These are realities we cannot see and they aren't our present lived experience, but they are nevertheless absolutely true. We have new life in Christ, the very life of God through the Spirit, and so our thoughts, values, ideals, etc are all transcendent. We only experience them now thru the Word, but our great hope is one day actually enjoying the promises in a glorified existence. We thus can be content with what we now have, and be at peace. And rejoice in the privilege of doing His will.

Let's conclude. Supposing that all we need to do in life is "believe in Jesus" (whatever that may mean to us) and nothing else, is fantasy. That kind of belief assures that we live as pagans. Paganism is worldliness. It's anti-theistic in its totality. It's evil. It is death. Let's honor God instead. And let's make our lives count for God. We do that by being transformed into a new creature through the Holy Spirit and then living out the life of Jesus. We must know our Bible, the Word of the living Christ, not for the sake of information, but *to live it*. There exists no other way to glorify God. Let's make this our heart's consuming desire, our magnificent obsession.