

EXCERPT FROM *FINDING TRUTH*

by Nancy Pearcey, Houston Baptist University

“I LOST MY FAITH AT AN EVANGELICAL COLLEGE”

I was once invited to give a presentation on Capitol Hill, and afterward a congressional chief of staff stood up and announced to everyone there, “I lost my faith at an evangelical college.”

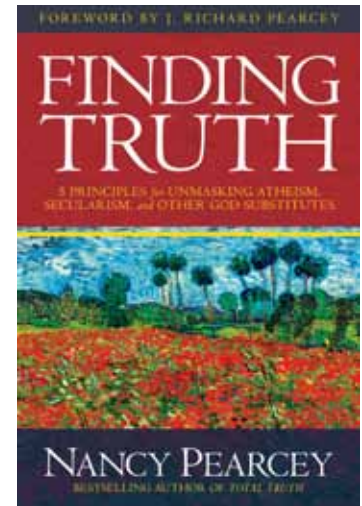
How did it happen? Afterward, I sought out the chief of staff, Bill, to hear his story. He explained that the professors at his college had taught the prevailing theories in their discipline—most of which were secular and sometimes explicitly anti-Christian. Yet they did little to offer a biblical perspective on the subject.

Bill even met with several of his professors outside of class, asking them, “How do you relate your faith to your academic discipline—to what you teach in the classroom?” Tragically, not one could give him an answer.

Eventually Bill concluded that Christianity did not *have* any answers, and he decided to abandon it. “I was sorry to give up my Christian faith,” he told me. “But it seemed to have no intellectual foundation.”

Bill’s story reflects an all-too-common pattern today. When young people leave home, they often leave behind their religious upbringing as well. Is there hope? Can a biblical worldview equip us with the resources to meet the challenge, reverse the pattern, and confidently set forth our case in the public arena?

The answer is a resounding yes. *Finding Truth* offers a fresh and original strategy to answer the questions raised by young people—and seekers of all ages. It unpacks five powerful principles from Scripture that cut to the heart of any competing worldview or religion. It highlights the life-giving truths that everyone wants but only Christianity can give.



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STUDY YOUR WAY BACK TO GOD

My personal history is similar to Bill's. Though raised in a Lutheran family, I could not get answers to the questions that bubbled up in my mind as a teenager. Midway through high school, I abandoned my religious upbringing altogether. Years later, in a ministry called L'Abri hidden away in a tiny village in the Swiss Alps, I finally met people who could answer my questions. (I tell my story under Principle #5.) My own years of searching and struggling as an agnostic left me with an intense conviction that Christians need to take questions seriously.

The task can seem daunting. At every turn—from the classroom to the workplace to the Internet—ideas contrary to Christianity are clamoring for our allegiance. Learning how to respond thoughtfully to every competing worldview would take a lifetime of study. And what happens when we encounter a *new* idea? Do we have to come up with a new argument every time?

Or is it possible to find a single line of inquiry that we can apply universally to all ideas?

What I have discovered is that the Bible itself offers a powerful strategy for critical thinking—five principles that cut to the heart of any worldview. By mastering these principles, you will be equipped to answer any challenge, while making a compelling and attractive case for Christianity.

GIVE ME EVIDENCE

The key passage is the first chapter of Romans. In fact, we can think of Romans 1 as Paul's apologetics training manual. Where does he begin? His first major point is that all people—everywhere and at all times—have access to evidence for God's existence. How? Through the created order: "the things that have been made." Let's begin with the verses where Paul explains the concept of general revelation:

We all have access to evidence for God through creation.
Romans 1:19—What can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.

Romans 1:20—His invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made.

In speaking of evidence from creation, Paul does not mean only physical nature. He also means human nature. Human beings are among the things "that have been made" (Rom. 1:20).

How do humans constitute evidence for God? Because humans are capable of knowing, the first cause that produced them must have a mind. Because humans are capable of choosing, the first cause must have a will. And so on. Philosopher Étienne Gilson captures the argument neatly: because a human is a *someone* and not a *something*, the source of human life must be also a Someone, and not the blind, automatic forces of nature.

ATHEISTS' CHILDREN AND THEIR GOD

This may explain why young children in every culture have a concept of God. Psychologist Paul Bloom at Yale University reports that "when children are directly asked about the origin of animals and people, they tend to prefer explanations that involve an intentional creator, even if the adults who raised them do not." That is, even if their parents are atheists.

These findings from psychology may cast new light on what Jesus meant when he urged his followers to "become like children" to enter the kingdom of God (Matt. 18:3). Yet if general revelation impinges on all human consciousness, why don't all people acknowledge God? What is Paul's answer? He says we "suppress the truth" taught by general revelation:

We all suppress the evidence for God from creation.

Romans 1:18—[They] suppress the truth.

Romans 1:21—Although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him.

Romans 1:28—They did not see fit to acknowledge God.

The concept of denial or suppression is said to be one of the most distinctive discoveries of modern psychology. Yet the idea that people often stifle or suppress what they know is nothing new. The Bible taught it long before the rise of modern psychology. Romans 1 says that fallen, sinful humans have a strong tendency to deny what we know about God.

The great drama of history is the tug of war between God and humanity. On one hand, God reaches out to humanity to make himself known. On the other hand, humans desperately seek to avoid knowing him. In the words of theologian Thomas K. Johnson, we “can take the account of Adam and Eve hiding from God behind a bush or tree as a metaphor for the history of the human race.”

HOW HUMANS HIDE

How do humans try to hide from God? What is the next point in Paul’s dissection of human motivations? They avoid God by creating idols:

We all create idols to take the place of God.

Romans 1:23—[They] exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Romans 1:25—They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator.

The first commandment may seem outdated if we think of idols as statues of wood or stone. But Scripture treats the topic of idolatry far more subtly. An idol is anything we want more than God, anything we rely on more than God, anything we look to for greater

fulfillment than God. Idolatry is thus the hidden sin driving all other sins.

This explains why, as psychologist David Powlison says, “idolatry is by far the most frequently discussed problem in the Scriptures.” In the Old Testament, the prophet Habakkuk describes people whose idol is their military power: “whose own might is their god.” Painting a vivid word picture of the enemy’s military as a “dragnet” for sweeping up whole societies, Habakkuk says “he sacrifices to his net and makes offerings to his dragnet” (Hab. 1:11, 16).

In the New Testament, Paul treats idolatry with the same penetrating psychological insight. Writing to members of the church in Ephesus, he urges them not to be sexually immoral, impure, or covetous—then adds what may seem a surprising twist: for that “person is an idolater, worshiping the things of this world” (Eph. 5:5 NLT). The hidden sin beneath the others is the tendency to make an idol of “the things of this world.”

IDOLS HAVE CONSEQUENCES

So here is Paul’s diagnosis of the human condition so far: God is constantly reaching out to people with evidence of his existence through general revelation. But humans are constantly suppressing those truths by creating idols.

This pattern of suppression creates an acute internal tension. On one hand, people are aware of the evidence for the biblical God from general revelation. On the other hand, they keep creating surrogate gods in a desperate attempt to suppress that evidence. To borrow a term from psychology, humans are trapped in cognitive dissonance, the mental stress of harboring concepts that contradict one another.

How does God break us out of the trap? He responds in a way we might not expect: He ratchets up the tension. He allows us to live out the consequences of our idols in order to intensify the cognitive dissonance—and

ultimately to press us to the point of making a decision:

God gives us up to the consequences of our idols—to a “debased” mind.

Romans 1:21—Although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking.

Romans 1:28—Since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind.

What *are* the consequences of serving idols? The Greek word for mind is *nous*, but it has a much richer meaning than the English word. It can be translated reason, understanding, or intellectual intuition. The church fathers often translated *nous* as the faculty for evaluating and directing the course of one’s life: “the eye of the soul.” So we can translate the word as worldview, the convictions by which we direct our lives.

Today the word *debased* has a primarily moral connotation, meaning wicked or degenerate. But in the original Greek, the word meant counterfeit money. So a debased worldview is one that offers a counterfeit god.

In the original language, this verse (Rom. 1:28) contains a fascinating wordplay. The word *worthwhile* in the first clause has the same root as *debased*. The parallel can be expressed like this: Just as people did not think it worthwhile to acknowledge God, so God gave them up to a worthless worldview: “They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves” (Jer. 2:5 NIV). Here’s how Paul expresses the connection:

God gives us up to the consequences of our idols—to “dishonorable” behavior.

Romans 1:24—God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves.

Romans 1:26—God gave them up to dishonorable passions.

Romans 1:28—God gave them up to a debased mind

to do what ought not to be done.

Once again, the connection is captured by the word exchanged. First Paul says people “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images” of created things (Rom. 1:23; see also Rom. 1:25). Next Paul shows what this trade-off does to human behavior: “Women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature,” and men did the same (Rom. 1:26–27). At the time Paul was writing, in both Greco-Roman culture and Hellenistic Jewish culture, “contrary to nature” was a standard phrase referring to homosexual behavior.

At the time, the term *nature* was not used the way people use it today, to mean behavior observed in the natural world. Instead nature meant behavior that is normative for *human nature*: behavior that fits the way humans were originally created, that accords with God’s purpose for humanity, that matches the ideal standard of what it means to be fully human.

In this sense of the term, all sin is contrary to human nature, and Paul goes on to itemize a representative sampling: “They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless” (Rom. 1:29–31). All these behaviors—and more—are contrary to what it means to be fully human.

In this chapter Paul, then, outlines a clear and calamitous progression: First, “they did not *honor* him as God” (Rom. 1:21). “Therefore God gave them up ... to the dishonoring of their bodies” (Rom. 1:24). “God gave them up to *dishonorable passions*” (Rom. 1:26). The principle is that those who dishonor God inevitably dishonor themselves and others. To adapt a phrase, idols have consequences.

FIVE STRATEGIC PRINCIPLES

In the first chapter of Romans, Paul has unfolded a series of actions—a drama of divine-human interaction—whose plot line provides the underlying rationale for a biblical apologetic. From it we can extract five strategic principles to identify the key elements in any worldview. A unique feature of the Romans 1 strategy is that it can be applied universally. No more memorizing different arguments for each theory. We can be confident that Romans 1 applies to them all.

PRINCIPLE #1— IDENTIFY THE IDOL

An idol is anything in the created order that is put in the place of God. This definition not only gives us tools to identify our personal idols, it also gives insight into the world of ideas. Philosophies and worldviews can also function as counterfeit gods.

As a matter of sheer logic, any explanation of life must have a starting point. It must trace the universe back to something that functions as the primal reality, the self-existent cause of everything else. Those who do not honor the transcendent God beyond the cosmos must make a divinity out of some power or principle immanent *within* the cosmos.

What about matter? Is matter part of the created order? Sure it is. Thus the philosophy of materialism qualifies as an idol. It claims that matter is the ultimate reality—the uncreated first cause of everything else. It denies the existence of anything beyond the material world, such as soul, spirit, mind, or God. New Atheists like to think of themselves as nonbelievers, but they believe devoutly in matter (or nature) as their substitute religion.

What about reason? Can it be an idol? Certainly. The philosophy of rationalism puts human reason in the place of God as the source and standard of all truth. Albert Einstein once described himself as “a believing rationalist.” He understood that it was a full-blown creed.

PRINCIPLE #2—IDENTIFY THE IDOL’S REDUCTIONISM

Romans 1 tells us that idolatry leads to a “debased” worldview, which opens the door to oppression, injustice, and all the other evils listed at the end of the chapter. What is the connection between idols and immoral behavior? The link is that idols always lead to a lower view of human life.

The Bible teaches that humans are made in the image of God. When a worldview exchanges the Creator for something in creation, it will also exchange a high view of humans made in God’s image for a lower view of humans in the image of something in creation.

To translate Paul’s argument into modern language, we need to master one philosophical term: *reductionism*. It means *reducing* a phenomenon from a higher or more complex level of reality to a lower, simpler, less complex level—usually in order to debunk or discredit it. For example, you have probably heard people say that Christianity is nothing but an emotional crutch. Or that ideas are nothing but products of chemicals reacting in our brains. Or that living things can be explained solely by physics and chemistry. These are all forms of reductionism.

Reductionism is a strategy for suppressing the truth: For if we can *reduce* humans to machines operating by natural forces, then we can explain their origin by purely natural forces.

PRINCIPLE #3—TEST THE IDOL: DOES IT CONTRADICT WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT THE WORLD?

Romans 1 teaches that some things are knowable by everyone—the truths of general revelation. It follows that any truth claim must match up with general revelation. If a *worldview* contradicts what we know about the world through general revelation, then it fails.

And we can be confident that every idol-based

worldview *will* fail. Why? Precisely because it leads to reductionism. If reductionism is like trying to stuff the entire universe into a box, inevitably something will stick out of the box. A box that defies a *part* of creation will always be too limited to explain the whole. Whatever does not fit into the box will be denigrated, devalued, or dismissed as unreal.

Think again of the example of materialism, since it is the dominant view in academia today. When it reduces humans to complex biochemical machines, what sticks out of the box? Free will. The power of choice. These are dismissed as illusions. Yet in practice, we cannot live without making choices from the moment we wake up every morning. One philosopher jokes that if people deny free will, then when ordering at a restaurant they should say, “Just bring me whatever the laws of nature have determined I will get.”

PRINCIPLE #4—TEST THE IDOL: DOES IT CONTRADICT ITSELF?

Idol-centered worldviews not only fail to match the external world, they also collapse internally. They are self-refuting. For example, a person may propose cultural relativism, which claims that there is no universal truth. But that statement itself makes a universal claim. Thus it contradicts itself.

As apologist Greg Koukl says, it commits suicide. When its own definition of truth is applied to itself, it undercuts itself.

This argument is a standard tool in every apologist’s toolbox. But *why* does it work? Again the key is reductionism. When a reductionistic worldview leads to a lower view of humanity, that includes the human mind. It reduces human reason to something less than reason. Yet the only way any worldview can argue its own case is by using reason. By discrediting reason, it undermines its *own* case. It is self-defeating.

To illustrate how the argument works, let’s use the

example of materialism once more. Materialism reduces thinking to biochemical processes in the brain, akin to the chemical reactions in digestion. But digestion is not something that can be true or false. It is just a biological fact. If thinking is reduced to brain processes, then our ideas are not true or false either. But in that case, how can the materialist know that *materialism* is true? The philosophy is self-refuting.

Christianity does not have this problem. Because humans are made in God’s image, human reason has the high dignity of reflecting the divine mind. Ironically, then, adherents of reductionist worldviews have to borrow Christianity’s high view of reason *in order to support their own view*. They have to rely on Christianity even as they reject it.

PRINCIPLE #5—REPLACE THE IDOL: MAKE THE CASE FOR CHRISTIANITY

In Principle #5 we uncover several more examples of secular thinkers who borrow from Christianity. For example, where did the concept of human rights come from? The late philosopher Richard Rorty was an atheist and Darwinist, yet he admitted that in the Darwinian struggle for existence, the strong prevail while the weak are left behind. So evolution cannot be the source of universal human rights. Instead, Rorty said, the concept came from the Christian claim “that human beings are made in the image of God.” He said he was happy to borrow the concept of universal rights from Christianity. He literally called himself a “free-loading” atheist.

No wonder Paul proclaims that he is “not ashamed” of the gospel (Rom. 1:16). Christianity is so appealing and attractive that adherents of other worldviews keep free-loading the parts they like best.