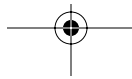


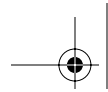
Introduction

In essence, this book began as an attempt to answer Andree Seu's call for a "theology of fullness of truth" about the tragedy of September 11, 2001, rather than the "kind of gag rule" by which evangelicals, especially, were restricted to saying "we cannot know what God is doing and why." Specifically, God's judgments were the subtext: we cannot know that God is judging the nation. Yet September 11 is only the starting point. This book continues on, and ends, as an attempt to respond to Os Guinness's call, in *Prophetic Untimeliness*, for "[a] rediscovery of the hard and the unpopular themes of the gospel"—here, God's judgments—that can "be such a rediscovery of the whole gospel that the result may lead to reformation and revival."¹ The inadequacy of our thinking about September 11 can point the way to a return to old Christian themes that decades of peace and prosperity seemed to have rendered obsolete, until that tragedy exposed the holes in our peace, prosperity and security.

Talk of revival overstates my case, for I am a historian and not a theologian or a pastor. Given my calling and use of September 11 as a starting point, this book focuses on God's judgments on the nations in history, not on his judgment of individuals in history or at the Last Judgment—topics more closely associated with revival. I do not deny or minimize the latter judgments but argue from the lesser and the obscure to the greater and more obvious: if God judges nations, and one like the U.S. not mentioned in Scripture, then how much more does he judge individuals, as clearly stated in Scripture. I stress Christ's reign over the nations more than the substitutionary atonement he offers to individuals, but safeguarding the latter doctrine is very much one of my purposes. If divine judgment against sin fell on the innocent Son, then how much more is judgment on sinful nations and individuals a valid gospel theme, albeit "hard and unpopular"? Judgment and salvation are two sides of the one coin of God's righteous activity

¹Andree Seu, "True Perspectives," *World*, October 20, 2001, p. 41; Os Guinness, *Prophetic Untimeliness: A Challenge to the Idol of Relevance* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), p. 100; see also p. 20.



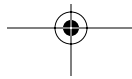


in history. By no means is this book meant as doom and gloom. At any time, the reader may mentally flip the coin and see the salvation offered through Christ's atoning work—albeit one partly defined by being a salvation from judgment rather than one left free for us to define as what Guinness calls “therapeutic self-concern” or as some other answer to our felt needs.²

This book argues for a partial reversal of the prevalent notion that Christianity is a worldview. As a dominant concept in evangelical circles, worldview thinking must share the blame for what Seu identified as an inadequate “theology by negation” after September 11. Worldview thought has been a useful corrective to past errors, but it needs to be challenged, and its diffidence about the tragedy demonstrates that. It is better suited to the predictable regularities of science or to our intentional choices than to unique, unpredictable events. The “knowing self” seated in its armchair develops a worldview and ignores its location in history's flight path. Grounded in philosophy, worldview thought seems unable to explain unique historical events or our ongoing vulnerability to them. In the West and in the United States, we imagine that our technology, our military might and our economic clout reduce uncontrollable events to a minimum. New Testament Christianity addresses this vulnerability in history more than it presents a comprehensive worldview. Worldview ideas admirably begin Paul's Mars Hill apologetic, with its appeal to a universal creation order, but they tend never to arrive at Paul's conclusion: “He has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead” (Acts 17:31). We will make it to the end of Paul's sermon.

I offer this critique of worldview thinking in a friendly spirit that acknowledges its many past contributions. One painful reality of our fragmented, politically polarized society is that we are most likely to discuss and argue with our friends, those closest to our position. Secularists of the left, center and right are very unlikely to read this book, so I must address my likely readers, evangelicals, many of whom subscribe to worldview thinking—now so predominant that I must take it as my debating partner. My argument (that inherent defects in worldview thinking prevent it from adequately addressing divine judgment in history) cannot prove a negative (that it can never do so). While I make my case as strong as possible to argue for a more historical approach, my critique of worldview must be understood with the qualifiers “so far,” “seemingly” and “as far as I know.” Already, David F. Wells's recent *Above All Earthly Pow'rs: Christ in a Postmodern World* goes a long way toward using judgment-in-history

²Guinness, *Prophetic Untimeliness*, pp. 54, 100.





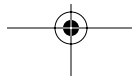
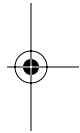
against postmodern thought and seeker-sensitive church strategies, while still retaining “worldview” as a term.³

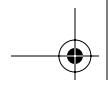
Some problems with worldview are not logical but sociological: people who use it often occupy niches in our society—generational, professional, political—and their special concerns shape its use. Boomers with unresolved issues about “growing up fundamentalist” may rely on worldview to disavow parents’ warnings of God’s wrath, when we should come to terms with that biblical concept by discarding distortions of it and embracing what remains. The rise to social influence of an evangelical professional knowledge class has had great benefits, but that class’s use of worldview to gain professional status and a hearing in the public square (see chapter 11) can boomerang by influencing the church more than the world. This class, too, must be encouraged to press on to the risky end of Paul’s sermon; the status and the hearing must be risked for the gospel’s sake. I am a Boomer in the knowledge class, so I am preaching to myself, too. Finally, worldview thinking has been utilized to make so many different (and opposed) political arguments that they indicate that the New Testament does not present one comprehensive worldview covering matters of politics, economics and international relations.

One version of worldview thinking criticizes postmodernism, and so does this book. My case is emphatically not a postmodern one. Postmodernism shares certain features of philosophy. We think more clearly when we acknowledge that we are in history’s flight path rather than when we imagine ourselves safe and snug in philosophy’s armchair. Stressing texts and their readings, postmodernism is very much in the reader’s armchair, even if several armchairs are circled round to create a reading community. This is a book about events that do not have multiple readings. God’s judgments in historical events fall on all sorts of people, not only the faith community, and they cannot be read as acts of deliverance. Christ’s return cannot be read as his defeat.

This book argues that Christianity is an interpretation of history (not an alternative reading of it but an old-fashioned metanarrative interpretation) far more than it is a worldview or philosophy. Thus, we must start with some comments on history and the historian. We historians usually balk at writing anything about recent events, for the final outcome is unknown and might come back to haunt us later. We like events that are safely past, and most or all of the consequences have already occurred. We like to be the last to bid during the card game, so to speak, after all other bids are known and final—and after we know the cards in

³David F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Pow’rs: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).





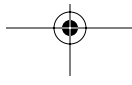
the other players' hands—and then we speak. Sometimes the usual rules do not work and will not suffice. This cautious approach might leave our readers with the false and dangerous illusion that history is safely past for them, too, and that they are as safe from the unpredictable as the historian who writes about the Pilgrims.

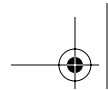
“Americans’ holiday from history is over,” wrote columnist George F. Will after the tragic attacks on September 11. His comment intrigued me then and still does today. Our cultural mindset hinders us from seeing ourselves as vulnerable human beings caught up in a stream of events over which we have little or no control. So pervasive is this mindset that it is highly unlikely even a major event like September 11 can reawaken in us a sense of our vulnerability and end our self-proclaimed “holiday from history.” By the word *history*, Will did not mean “past events,” for September 11 did not awaken us to the importance of the Treaty of Westphalia (1648). I believe that he meant by it what I mean by it: the human condition of having our lives caught up in a stream of events—past, present and future—that can crash in on our lives from the outside, as it were, without our ability to initiate, prevent or control them. We know that past persons such as Christopher Columbus or George Washington were caught in this vulnerable condition, but we dismiss our own vulnerability (as we do our own mortality) from our minds. Our culture makes this mental dismissal relatively easy.

History has two primary meanings: the sum total of past events, or some part of them; a written account of past events.⁴ Yet it also has a third, an all-encompassing meaning, as the one stream of events from the distant past to the unknown future: past events continue to affect the present, as present ones will the future, in one ongoing stream. That may seem academic when we are calmly navigating the stream, but when we realize we have lost control and are bobbing up and down in it, then our vulnerability becomes the chief fact of our existence.

We must not slide over that little word *event* either. It basically means “something that happens”; however, it implies that this something is unusual or unpredictable and outside our control. We might not dignify the sunrise or our breakfast with the title of “events.” Often, the things that happen are governed by nature’s regularities or by our own choices. Then we lose sight of how happenings can be unwanted and unexpected but insistent intruders in our lives. Such times of normality are misleading, and September 11 awakened us to the true state of affairs.

⁴See, for example, Robert Eric Frykenberg, *History and Belief: The Foundations of Historical Understanding* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 19-22, 25-37.





Introduction

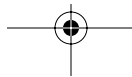
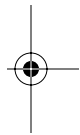
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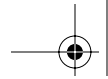
Christianity is an interpretation of history. That is too impersonal a description, for Christianity is faith in a person, Jesus Christ. This book focuses on his title (his favorite self-designation), Son of Man, which points to him as the meaning of human history (in the third sense) and the only rescue from its calamities and its corrosive, destructive ebbs and flows that are forms of divine judgment. The Son of Man descended to the cross to bear divine judgment for us and ascended to heaven from whence he can rescue us from history's calamities and its erasing of our transitory lives. The salvation he offers is a deliverance from judgment, not a comprehensive worldview that delivers the self from ignorance or incomprehension or intellectual problems.

Yet, we must define what we mean by *judgment*, and this book focuses intently on the meaning of the Hebrew word *mishpat*—especially the one meaning of a “sifting out.” Thus, judgment is not only a final, curtain-dropping event but also a lengthy process with God as an active investigator testing people's hearts, giving the wicked a chance to repent and the righteous to fall away. This meaning helps to bridge the gap between judgment as a scriptural doctrine that most believers do not question and specific events they might be reluctant to identify as judgments. We cannot hear God's verdict, “Guilty,” but in some cases we can discern a process whereby public ambiguity gives way to a clearer separation of those who seek to do good from those who seek to do evil. We do not achieve perfect discernment, but we have enough insight to avoid the agnostic view that events are so confusing we must take judgment off the table as an unknowable concept. We cannot do so, for the final curtain-dropping event remains, and this book does not minimize that reality.

September 11 raised the question: was God judging the nation? Reverends Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell hastily tried to answer that question on a television talk show two days later. They soon apologized, at least in part. Yet readers of Scripture realized that it talks of divine judgment, that the issue could not be so easily or hurriedly decided or dismissed. This book tries to address the issue in a thoughtful way. As an American and a student of this nation's history, I focus on the American experience. These ideas are not limited or especially applicable to the United States. God judges all nations. But here the event (September 11), the author and the focus are American.

This book is not an attempt to exploit the tragedy, which is only the starting point for its questions and answers, nor is it a rapid response to cash in on a tragedy. The passage of time has allowed for valid responses: comfort for the bereaved, debate over the war on terrorism, measures to increase homeland security and debate between liberals and conservatives over what domestic and foreign policies might best address the issues raised by the tragedy. All are valid,





but they are incomplete. As long as we sidestep divine judgment, we will not learn the all-encompassing lessons of September 11. And, since the sifting out is ongoing, September 11 may be a test of our present and future response to God. I survey a broad group of commentators on the tragedy; however, my quotes from certain writers or journals should not be misconstrued as approval of their viewpoints on September 11 or of their ideological stance. Erroneous views can be instructive. Thus, the basic idea of this book—that we must return (cautiously and accurately) to the concept of God's judging activity in history as central to Christianity—emerges partly out of the inadequacy of other ideas.

To send this interpretation into a polarized society is risky. It is almost to court misunderstanding and distortion by left, right or center. Let me try to avoid that. Since most evangelicals vote Republican, any independent evangelical case may be seen as automatically subversive, an attempt to lure them from their allegiance with an argument that departs from widely held conservative views and that claims the divine *mishpat* falls on Republicans as well as Democrats. A personal note: I am a rural, pro-life independent, a long-time board member for a Christian school and no Jim Wallis. Yet I write here as a historian who feels it is his Christian calling to be nonpartisan but even more to try to analyze events and not to add one more bit of political speech to our confusing debates. Real events continue to occur despite the partisan spin that is applied to them. To analyze God's judgments as falling on both political parties is not to equate them or to measure their respective failings (which only God can do) or to set oneself up as a mediator between them—it is to argue that the fear of the Lord ought to fall on them both and on us all. This is not meant as a moralizing judgment on both sides but as an attempt to discern the workings of God in history, however difficult that task certainly is. Yet it is necessary, lest the idea of God's sovereignty lose its force and become a cliché. Partisans on both sides, so to speak, hit the "Reduce" button on the copy machine and come up with a version of Christ that is only 77 percent or 93 percent of actual size, to fit him in to their broad coalition. My hope is that people on both sides might see that the chief benefit of rising above partisan battle smoke is to gain a clearer view of the glories of Christ, and so chapter 6 is the key section of this book.

The ultimate justification for this book is that you, the reader, see Christ's glory more clearly by means of it. The ultimate protection against its distortion can only be a prayer that the Lord will defend whatever truth it contains. Its ultimate goal is that you may know him, "whom to know is life eternal."

