

MATTHIAS J. PEARSON, ARCHITECT

**The Pragmatic Evangelical**

"Thoughts on being Idealistic"

Matt Pearson  
Sunday, May 14, 2006**Introduction**

I want to invite you into some of the thoughts and questions I have been contemplating of late. Questions that may sound trivial or unanswerable but nonetheless, with pursuit, can deepen our faith, help us make our convictions coherent, and better prepare us for God's future.

During the Deep End meetings of two summers ago I discussed a topic titled "The Integrated Life and The Integrated Voice". The effort of that discussion dealt with our witness to others by working toward a balanced presentation of the God's attributes through both general and specific revelation.

My purpose for this morning is to encourage you to consider another balance. An equilibrium with respect to a practical, everyday outworking of your faith along with passionately pursuing truth and experiencing beauty.

Are you an idealist or do you consider yourself more of the practical sort, one who is pragmatic? Consider the following definitions and while you think about them ask whether they fit as an attribute of God.

prag·mat·ic adj

1. more concerned with **practical results** than with theories and principles
2. dealing with or looking at the facts of history with particular regard to the lessons that can be learned from them

prag·ma·tism n

1. a **straightforward** practical way of thinking about things or dealing with problems, concerned with **results** rather than with theories and principles
2. a philosophical view that a theory or concept should be evaluated in terms of **how it works and its consequences** as the standard for action and thought.

Is God pragmatic?

prac·ti·cal adj

1. concerned with actual **facts and experience**, not theory
2. **sensible** or useful, and likely to be effective
3. plain, **functional**, and suitable for everyday use

Is God practical?

Why do many (possibly most) of us desire or relate to these attributes?

MATTHIAS J. PEARSON – AIA  
2213 WEST CENTRAL STREET  
SILOAM SPRINGS, ARKANSAS 72761  
479-263-1109  
pearsonarchitect@centurytel.net

pearsonarchitect.com

Could it be because we are always searching for security in our lives by measuring and attempting to know the expected outcome and thus creating a safe place to be?

Ask these questions about why do we do the things we do?

Why did you come to church?

Why do you work?

Why do you study and get an education, take this class or that one?

Why do we play?

Do we answer each of those questions with: "so that"? Do we do these things to obtain a measurable, immediate effect or to gain agreeable satisfaction of some kind?

What are the dangers of being pragmatic or practical? How do we see some of the effects of these attributes in our society? In education? In business? In construction and design? In our relationships?

On the other hand...

What does it mean to be idealistic?

i-de-al-ist-n

1. somebody who rejects practical considerations in favor of the pursuit of **perfection**
2. somebody who aspires to or lives in accordance with **high standards** or **principles**

Is God idealistic?

Have we become fooled into the modernist philosophy that positive, immediate results are the gauge for success in our endeavors? While facts, results, usefulness and experience are obviously valuable and important, I believe **our most important aim is the recognition and magnification of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life - to seek to understand who he is and what he has planned even if we don't fully understand the depths of his knowledge and wisdom, or grasp with our weak emotion the beauty he represents, or can't see what the outcome of his plans may be.**

Here is a scriptural puzzle:

Psalm 19 encourages us to wonder at nature in verses 1-6 and pursue his laws, statutes, and commandments through the remainder of the chapter.

**The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands. Day to day pours forth speech, and night-to-night reveals knowledge.** There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard. Their line has gone out through all the earth, and their utterances to the end of the world. In them He has placed a tent for the sun, which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber; It rejoices as a strong man to run his course. Its rising is from one end of the heavens, and its circuit to the other end of them; and there is

nothing hidden from its heat.

**The law of the LORD is perfect**, restoring the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple. The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; the judgments of the LORD are true; they are righteous altogether. They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them your servant is warned; **In keeping them there is great reward**. Who can discern his errors? Acquit me of hidden faults. Also keep back your servant from presumptuous sins; Let them not rule over me; then I will be blameless, and I shall be acquitted of great transgression. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my rock and my Redeemer. - Psalm 19

Yet Isaiah 55 states that God's ways are higher than ours.

"Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. "Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourself in abundance. " Incline your ear and come to Me. Listen, that you may live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, according to the faithful mercies shown to David. "Behold, I have made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. "Behold, you will call a nation you do not know, And a nation which knows you not will run to you, because of the LORD your God, even the Holy One of Israel; for He has glorified you."

Seek the LORD while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to the LORD, and He will have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. **"For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, "declares the LORD. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.** "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there without watering the earth and making it bear and sprout, and furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater; so will my word be which goes forth from my mouth; It will not return to me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it. "For you will go out with joy and be led forth with peace; the mountains and the hills will break forth into shouts of joy before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands. "Instead of the thorn bush the cypress will come up, and instead of the nettle the myrtle will come up, and it will be a memorial to the LORD, for an everlasting sign which will not be cut off." - Isaiah 55

Is it practical to pursue something we can't attain? I fear that we have allowed our practical, pragmatic character inhibit our desire and ambition to plumb the depths of Gods character.

Let's shape a model that will begin to answer these questions and give us an opportunity to gain a balanced perspective on our believing lives.

### **A Three-Legged Stool**

R.C. Sproul suggests that the attributes of God can be divided into the categories of Truth, Love, and Beauty, a three-legged stool that is firmly grounded.

Truth	-	doctrine, mind/head, knowledge
Love	-	behavior, what we do, action, hand
Beauty	-	heart, not an action, reflection, observation, emotion

How can we reflect on all three attributes and not be shallow and simplistic in any one? The past few months we have been studying community and the importance of our interaction with one another. I also suspect that like me your Christian experience has camped quite a bit on working on the leg of love. Not that we have learned how to express it correctly. We read books on how to do this or that. We talk about community and how to show the love of Christ through kind deeds, devotion and care for fellow believers, and the like. There seems to be good attention paid to this leg.

However, concurrent with this, do we relish the opportunity to spend time with deep truths and doctrine? Do we hesitate because we perceive it to be unattainable or even divisive? Do we value the unshakable strength we can gain through tackling the deeper issues of the faith?

Not only this, do we spend proactive time reflecting on the beauty of God? How do we do that and what does it look like?

A community is formed around a common focus and for that community to flourish it must protect that focus. Our focus is God – his truth, love and beauty. Not that we can protect God, quite the opposite, but he is the reason for our gathering.

I will spend the bulk of my time on the leg of truth with some additional time spent on the leg of beauty.

#### **First – Truth**

#### **Being Truth-Driven is Critical – Thinking Matters!**

“For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God” - Colossians 1:9-10

We must be concerned with what is true, conforming to a measure or a pattern (idealism), conforming to reality (but not necessarily measurable reality by human standards)

During a dinner last month for the seniors in our department at school we were discussing the things that the students enjoyed and disliked during their education at JBU. The topic centered on a course called the Essentials of Evangelical Theology. This class focuses on the essential doctrinal issues that are common among the diverse make-up of the evangelical community. One of the students spoke out for many of his peers by saying that he wished we didn't have to have discussions about doctrinal issues because it seemed they only led to arguments. He wished we would just focus on love for each other and avoid the uncomfortable inquiries. This is an example of a practical approach to the Christian life. It will result in a life with little staying power and one that is ill equipped to address the issues of culture around us.

One of the implications with bolstering the leg of truth is that we will not always know how some particular doctrine in the Bible is good for us. John Piper has said, "In our western culture we are especially pragmatic and demanding. If we don't see the payoff of a doctrine immediately, we tend to ignore it."

He continues, "The effects on our lives of what we know are always more than we know or can explain. Sometimes we must simply learn something because God says it's true. Then later we may see how the knowledge protected us, or strengthened us, or humbled us, or purified us, or guided us, or enabled us to see other things as true. The issue boils down to **trust**. Do we trust that God has revealed what is good for us to know?"

Jesus trusted like this.

For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in his mouth; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, **but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously**; and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed. - 1 Peter 2:21-24

We **must** pursue the truths of God. We must not be afraid to struggle with the attributes of God that are difficult to understand. We must engage the intricate and demanding issues of Scripture.

To illustrate, here are some of the questions I have been wrestling with of late:

How would you respond to these subjects?

Election – It's in the Bible often

Predestined – It's also in there often

Matthew 5:48 - "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

The sovereignty of God – how far does it extend?

Evil, pain and suffering – Are they under God's sovereignty?

Mission strategy – Save all we can or a reproducing church in every people group

The form and structure of worship

Piper goes on to compare a Pragmatist of today and the Puritans of long ago:

“We Americans are pragmatists to the max. We want results. And we want them yesterday. We want them simply. We want them without too much pondering and too much pain. And in the church, we have developed all kinds of Christ-coated remedies that are shallow and short-lived. We are not, by and large, the deeply grounded saints that some of our forefathers were.

“J. I. Packer compares the old English Puritans who lived and suffered from 1550 to 1700 with the Redwoods of California. They were giants whose roots were incredibly deep in the Bible, and whose branches reached to the heavens, and whose trunks were so strong and durable they could endure forest fires that scar them but don't kill them. But then Packer looks out over the pragmatic American landscape of our quick fixes for life's problems and our impatience with depth and complexity and pain, and says, "Affluence seems for the past generation to have been making dwarfs and deadheads of us all."

Here's the difference between the pragmatists and the Puritans: pragmatists do not have the patience to sink the roots of hospitality and brotherly kindness and authentic love in the deep rock of Romans 6-8. We want to jump straight from justification to the practical application of chapter 12. Just give us a list. Tell us what to do. Fix the problem at the immediate surface level, so it goes away. But the Puritans were different. They looked at the book of Romans and saw that **life** is built another way. Being a sage, being a Redwood, being unshakable in storm and useful in times of indescribable suffering – that does not come quickly or easily. Romans is not two chapters long. It is 16 chapters long. It does not skip from chapter 5 to 12. It leads us down deep into the roots of godliness, so that when we come up, we are not people with lists, but people with unshakable life and strength and holiness and wisdom and love.”

What this requires is time, study, inquiry, headaches, advice, research, Google searches, diligence, confusion and patience. And we may not be able to understand what we are wrestling with for quite some time but what it does begin to do is make our faith and thought coherent. It helps us organize our belief. It prepares us to defend the gospel, to defend the community of faith. Through the working of the Spirit our belief begins to sink piers deep into the foundation of the character of God.

It will also require us to reconsider how we measure the knowledge we gain because there can be a danger to unbalanced knowledge. There is a danger to pursuing truth to the exclusion of love and beauty. We must develop a stable belief, our three-legged stool.

As I am learning, one of the keys to maintaining this balance is to savor the knowledge gained. Not only for the benefit it will bring to a productive Christian life but also for the simple idea of delighting in God. God gives knowledge and our return delight in that knowledge is worship.

### **Intrinsic and Means Good**

Means Good – Practical good

“Something that is good in a utilitarian sense is good because it brings about some other good.”

Intrinsic Good – Idealistic good

“To say that something is intrinsically good means that nothing else is needed to justify it or make it good.”

An argument for intrinsic thinking and the life of the mind:

1. What God has made is good
2. It is intrinsically good to know what is itself good
3. Consequently, it is intrinsically good to know what God has made

For example, worship is an intrinsic good. It ends with our admiration of God.

“It is good to give thanks to the LORD and to sing praises to your name.” - Psalm 92:1

“Praise the Lord! Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them.” - Psalm 111:1-2

“How good it is to sing praises to our God; for he is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting.” - Psalm 147:1

While we do need to think continually, think accurately, think connectedly, and think habitually, we also need to realize how this thinking weighs into the Christian life.

So it is important that we study God's truth and wrestle with the doctrines contained in scripture, not only for equipping us for the life but also for intrinsic knowledge that leads to worship.

### **Seeing the Beauty of God in Everyday Life**

The third leg of our stool is beauty. Perhaps it is the leg that is overlooked the most. Why does God create beauty? What is beauty? Can I study it or is it just perceived?

David desired two things in Psalm 27:4:

“One thing I have asked from the LORD, that I shall seek: That I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD and to meditate in His temple.” - Psalms 27:4

Naturally, when we think of the beauty of God we think of God's creation. We may ask questions such as, “Is God intimately involved in the design, orchestration and expression of the natural beauty we see every day? The changing sunset? The individual flower that only you will see? The millions of shades of green you can see with one gaze into a wooded area?” What about the beauty of how he works to orchestrate history, calamity, everyday life, etc.

Charles Spurgeon has said, "I believe that every particle of dust that dances in the sunbeam does not move an atom more or less than God wishes – that every particle of spray that dashes against the steamboat has its orbit, as well as the sun in the heavens – that the chaff from the hand of the winnowing is steered as the stars in their courses, The creeping on an aphid over the rosebud is as much fixed as the march of the devastating pestilence – the fall of ...leaves from a poplar is as fully ordained as the tumbling of an avalanche."

That sounds like God's proactive involvement in nature and in creating the beauty we see. Is he just as proactive in every area of our lives?

When we marry truth with beauty we get worship. And God desires to gain worship from every area of our lives.

Colossians 1:15-20 makes it plain that the redemptive work of Christ reaches into every nook and cranny of his creation. Into all things!

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities--all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything. For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven.

How do we train ourselves to see the hand of God, his beauty in every area of life? Not only the obvious areas of church and cell groups, Christian music and books but everywhere.

Does a practical mindset force us to see these things as just tools or as vehicles to bring us to worship?

Marveling at the design of the human body, the hand, the mind, sight  
 Have you considered numbers lately?  
 Why is music such a big deal? It touches something deep inside of us  
 Design - rhythm, proportion, repetition, materials, physicality

Does God care about these things? Does he care whether we recognize his work? Our recognition of his work is worship.

Kirsten and I often pray for our kids that they will have knowledge of right and wrong and a love for life (beauty).



## Living more largely

When we live in a constricted way, we close down. We do not look for opportunities to experience goodness. We restrict ourselves to narrow confines, as if we are holding up our hands, palms outward, and saying, "Stay away from me. I have my life set already." (remember, I'm practical, no surprises please!) We miss the wideness that comes to those who are open to new possibilities. We do not take in the richness that presents itself to us. Living a constricted life is like reading second-rate novels instead of the classics, or eating macaroni and cheese out of a box every night. We get along, to be sure, but without the depth and grace of a master writer and without the pleasing tastes and nutrition of a variety of quality foods. It is not (necessarily) that we have done something wrong but that we are content with lesser goods. When we live more largely, we actively look for fresh ways to experience goodness; we seek out new situations and activities. We are eager to embrace a wide array of good (beauty), as if we are holding our hands out in front of us, palms up and open, saying, "Come to me." Our basic orientation is different – we value the good we encounter and passionately want to increase it." - Clifford Williams

## Conclusion

Work out your salvation to establish a strong foundation based upon truth, love and beauty. My purpose for this morning has been to encourage you to consider a balance with respect to a practical, everyday outworking of your faith along with passionately pursuing truth and experiencing beauty.

Pursue Truth! Make it your aim to ask the demanding questions and grapple with their possible answers. God's has given us his spirit to guide us in this pursuit.

Love one another! Live in peace and in community with a common aim to make much of God and to know him.

Stop and look for God's beauty. It is everywhere around us. Worship God as a natural response to our increasing knowledge of him and delight in his varied expressions of splendor.

We are in fact seeking results – results that are enduring, strong, steadfast, and honoring to the One who has bought us.