

John Peck (wisdom & worldview)

Charles Strohmer talks to John Peck about his conversion to the wisdom of God for all of life. His story and insights may surprise you.

English philosopher, theologian, and Christian minister John Peck is one of those epistles of grace and wisdom that you wish the church and the world had more of. Because he keeps his head down, not enough people are aware of him, even though he is one of the founders of the inimitable Greenbelt Arts Festival and of College House (Cambridge) ? both of which are about a 24/7 faith for all of life.* For those of us who are blessed to be in his orbit, he is a significant light in the development of a biblical Christian wisdom for all of life.

The following conversation with John was originally published in the inaugural issue of *Openings* (Autumn, 1998). It is being republished on this site because its message has become even more important today, especially in America, a country now polarized around rigid ideological and theological interests and in desperate need of God's wisdom to end the paralysis. Except for rewriting this introduction and a few minor changes, the original interview has not been changed.

At the time of this conversation, John and I were in the third year of what turned out to be a five-year writing project, co-authoring [Uncommon Sense: God's Wisdom for Our Complex and Changing World](#). So it seemed like an ideal time talk publicly about understanding and applying the wisdom of God for everyday life, and why that kind of discipleship of the mind remains elusive to many of us. In the following conversation, John talks about the dramatic transformation of mind that he experienced ? as a Christian ? which started him on the road to learning and living a wholistic biblical view of life. He shares pithy examples of how it applies to business and economics, Christian publishing, the arts, marriage and family, politics, and science, and how to use Scripture to tease it out and see how Jesus and the gospel fits into this.

Before Greenbelt was launched (1974, on a farm in Suffolk), John was a senior lecturer at Glasgow Bible College (now International Christian College). He moved from Glasgow to become senior minister at Earl Soham Baptist (now Framlingham Baptist Community Church). His other hats have included teaching Hebrew and Greek, lecturing on ethics and philosophy, writing, and being a consultant for a wide variety of groups, programs, and initiatives. He has lectured at the Institute for Christian Studies (Toronto), and he and his family have strong ties with several congregations and institutions in the States, which began through Trinity Baptist Church (Livonia, Michigan) in 1983. Over decades of marriage, John and his wife, Hanna, raised five biological and forty foster children ? a lifestyle of love, service, and embrace of the other that has rubbed off on their children, now adults.

Charles Strohmer: John, you haven't always thought like a Christian as you do now, have you? How did you, as a Christian, arrive at this new attitude of mind? **John Peck:** Well, the sort of nursery, if I can put it like that, in which I was cared for and taught as a new Christian was strong on Christian separation from the world. So we didn't drink, smoke, dance, play cards. That sort of thing. I didn't go to a movie theater for ten years. Actually, I'm rather glad that was my first Christian discipline because it left me with a lot of freedom to get to know the Bible, to learn how to pray and witness, and so on.

But over the years it left me in conflict. Part of me was certainly committed to what you could call the devotional life, and I would not for a moment want to deny or detract from my Christian obligations here. Trouble was, I couldn't match that with things in the world that I recognized to be of value. For instance, having done my degree, I was teaching non-Christian religions at Glasgow Bible Institute, and I could not deny what seemed to me the considerable spiritual power of the Exordium in the first chapter of the Koran. I also found a lot of the spiritual psychology of Buddhism teaching me quite unconsciously about different aspects of my Christian devotional life. But I couldn't match what was going on here with the way I'd been taught as a Christian to see life.

CS: Something quite fundamental wasn't right? **JP:** Yes. And it came to a head in a particular way with literature. My two great loves were the metaphysical poets and Elizabethan drama. I could not deny the value in these, but I had no way to say that I could appreciate that value because there was this complete separation of the religious and the secular going on in my mind. Secular things were bad. Of course, I'd try to pick out bits and spiritualize them, but that wasn't a satisfactory process. I simply did not have a way to appreciate what was of value in literature (or culture, for that matter) or to criticize what wasn't. There was nothing I seemed to be able to do about this, and all sorts of uncertainties arose in me as a result. I knew this left me vulnerable, but there was nothing I could do. Then something happened that changed everything. I had to teach Ethics at G.B.I., and in pursuance of that a friend lent me a book called *The Christian Philosophy of Law, Politics, and the State*, by Hebden Taylor. That book introduced me to the modal theory, and that theory unlocked so many of doors that enabled me to see the validity of the ?secular? areas of life.

CS: So that turning point gave you a new way of seeing life and being a Christian in it. Sounds like a kind of conversion. **JP:** Well, I nearly had a nervous breakdown! There were so many things I wanted to explore all at once. And then I gravitated toward others who had already learned this stuff and began to explore a Christian perspective of things like politics, business, science, and

the arts. In fact, it was in looking at science from the point of view of the Bible that I began to recognize that all science is religiously driven, and it was then that I began to learn what idolatry was. Before that, I thought idolatry was the heathen in his blindness bowing down to wood and stone. It hadn't occurred to me that you could be a scientist and make an idol of your science. God is just as involved in economics, or politics, or science, or art as He is in our church-related (religious) activities. The thing is, once you realize that these 'secular' laws are ordained by God then you're obeying God in obeying them.

CS: Or out of your politics, or your business, or your art, or your family . . . **JP:** That's right. These can be disguised idolatries. Another key was that I began to understand that life was no longer divided into two unrelated bits, the religious and the secular. This revolutionized my understanding of spirituality. I saw quite clearly that spirituality is about obedience to God's order for the universe that we live in, and that God is just as involved in economics, or politics, or science, or art as He is in our church-related (religious) activities. The thing is, once you realize that these 'secular' laws are ordained by God then you're obeying God in obeying them.

CS: Sounds like a whole new world opened up to you. You must have felt like you'd come home. **JP:** I remember sitting back from my desk one day and saying about this, 'Nothing can be that good!?' Although, mind you, I've always held it subject to criticism. For example, as a theory, modal analysis doesn't cope much with the supernatural dimension. But okay. I wasn't expecting it to be perfect. In fact, I'm quite glad I'm aware of its limitations, because I know folk who've made a kind of orthodoxy out of it, which has brought them all sorts of headaches.

CS: What is modal thinking, modal analysis, and how can we put it to work for us? **JP:** It will be difficult to summarize here, but I'll have a go. It's a theory that looks at the 'whole' of life as being made up of different areas of existence, such as art, law, religion, economics, social matters, and so on. Modal theory sees each of these areas as referring to the many aspects, or modes, of life and existence under God, and it sees each aspect as functioning by its own God-ordained laws or principles. It therefore helps us get to grips with the way God has ordained that the different aspects of everyday life should be conducted. It gives us a way to do distinctly Christian studies of the arts, business, politics, economics, sociology, and so on. It shows that our obediences to God cannot be limited to our religious and moral modes of our being. And it has unexpected benefits too. It enables us to deal with the paradoxes of Scripture, for instance, and to understand the disguised idolatries of our modern cultures more clearly.

CS: How does Jesus fit into all this? **JP:** Well, there's no way he can be kept out! It's his creation. For instance, modal thinking also gives us a way out of one of the modern age's most fundamental problems when thinking about life. For example, non-Christian theories of life fasten on one or two of the aspects as the key for understanding the universe and human nature. For example, humanists fasten on reason, communists fasten on technology and economics, Buddhists tend to fasten on psychology. And they do this as a way for understanding and judging all of life. This gets them into trouble in the long run because everything can't be explained only economically or only psychologically, and so on.

Christians have their equivalent to this. They often judge the value of everything only in terms of religion and morals. And this gets them into trouble in the long run for the same reason. Modal theory helps you steer clear of this because it shows that no aspect is capable of fully explaining all of life, for each is but a part of life. Further, it helps you to see the aspects as having their unity and 'explanation' in Jesus Christ alone. The Bible can help us understand this, as well as to see where we may be violating God's laws in the aspects and therefore be in need of making changes in our wisdom.

CS: Isn't there a problem here that is as subtle as it is profound? Some Christians believe they are already applying this wholistic way of reasoning, but what is generally occurring, especially in the public square, is that they are arguing only with the Bible's religious and moral thinking as the remedy for ills within, say, politics, economics, the arts, social issues. **JP:** Yes. Our obedience to God cannot be limited to or defined by our religious and moral obediences. When Christians do this, they violate God's laws for the other aspects of life without even knowing it. What's needed is instruction from Scripture for fulfilling our political, economic, and social obediences, and so on.

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CS: Yet, it's often difficult to get this across. Why is that? **JP:** Because they have an assumption that they're doing it biblically, and assumptions are difficult to discuss with most people. You can be getting it quite wrong without realizing it. I remember running across a Christian business some years ago. It claimed to be Christian anyway. But its advertising sounded just like the world's, and I knew folk who worked there who told me that the employers were extremely hard to work for. Now, if you haven't got a truly Christian theory, or vision, of business as, among other things, a rescue operation--if it isn't a saving, a liberating, vision--God's laws for that aspect get violated, things go wrong, and people suffer.

CS: Are you suggesting that the employers assume they're working out of a Christian view of business just because they are Christian? **JP:** That's why it's so hard to discuss it with them at times. You're dealing with assumptions. Further, should you get

going into a good discussion with these folk, it can get quite complicated. One thing I try to point out is that we don't do anything in life without a theory, or vision, of how a thing works. And if Christ is Lord, then he has to be Lord even of our theories, our visions, which means that, fundamentally, they have got to have a gospel-shaped character. That's why I talk about it as being saving, rescuing, liberating. But it's difficult to get this over.

Most people tend to think that good business is not telling lies, not breaking contracts, not flirting with the secretaries. Well, okay, we need to be good moral people. But that's not enough of a theory for business. So you find, for instance, then when you talk to a person in business about making contracts that are generous in nature, there's the rub, because the person is not thinking of business as being a liberating process, for business has been reduced, even for the Christian, to making as much profit as you can. Full stop. And because it's an assumption, it's not known.

CS: I was recently almost burned by this attitude in Christian publishing. Just weeks before my fifth book was to be printed and then shipped to the stores ? I mean, it was all set to go, and with a major Christian publisher ? the publisher phoned me to explain that they had decided not to publish the book ? because we've concluded it isn't going to make any money for us. I was astonished. He then said, I've got to make this call to 30 other authors today. Should such publishers even refer to themselves ?Christian? anymore?**

JP: The problem here is partly economic, certainly, but it's not just in that aspect that God's laws are being violated. For instance, the publishers are part of an entire industry in a culture that fails to ask some quite radical questions, such as about the sorts of books that are published ? those that sell so well only because they appeal to the prejudices and preoccupations of the worldly Christians, and feeding it. Recently, I happened to be browsing a Christian book catalog and accidentally came across things that were out of this world. Well, out of God's world, anyway!

There was a title in the personal growth section indicating that the book's contents, which were going to tell us about love, had all the trappings of romanticism. But love isn't an emotion you can hope to cultivate lastingly, as the catalog blurb suggested. Love is a decision. This book is certainly not talking that way. Another I saw claimed to be about gaining emotional freedom. The jacket blurb promised readers a well-balanced emotional life, and I wondered what the author would do with Jeremiah, Ezekiel, or John the Baptist!

Others that I saw were filled with ?how to? formulas to help readers with their marriages. Methods are how to do it. Well, my wife and I have been married for a long time, through some pretty rough patches, too, but we've never read books on marriage about how to keep each other interested. At the beginning we made an assumption that we belonged to each other and that we had to care for each other no matter what. That's what it's all about.

CS: Publishers must do more than examine the economic aspect. **JP:** One of the radical questions the industry's not asking about these books is that they're all concentrating on getting yourself right. To me, the Christian life is about forgetting yourself. It's about saving, rescuing, liberating others, about getting to know the needs of those around you and doing something about them. Now that I think about it, one of the things that has helped move our marriage along is that we've always been involved in other people's troubles. My question to Christian publishers is: are we always going to spend our time concentrating on examining ourselves? It's a kind of perpetual childhood, isn't it? I mean, its kids that are absorbed with themselves, who are the center of their universes. And then there's all the family stuff, which assumes the nuclear family. I defy anyone to find a nuclear family in the Bible. Certainly the family of God is not a nuclear family; thank God.

CS: Although we try to live like we are one. **JP:** And that can produce churches that live like that. It's a shame, really. I can appreciate the occasional book like this, because you've got to have something for children--I mean children in the faith. But this is a whole industry dedicated to giving middle aged adult Christians children's material.

CS: Modal thinking and analysis sounds quite different from what we're accustomed to. **JP:** Yes. And when you start to try to cope with the questions it raises, then the complexities begin to arise. It's like I often say about the gospel: it's like a daisy; any child can pick one, but if you want to understand it, to study it biologically and so on, it takes a lifetime.

CS: And you use the Bible for this study of secular life? **JP:** Yes. For me it meant that I was able to stop reading Scripture through what I call the ?stained glass widow effect.? That is, I was able to start understanding Scripture other than religiously and morally and I began to see the Bible's ?secular? wisdom. For example, when I was involved in the arts with Greenbelt [begun, 1973], I was obviously confronted with the need to be able to articulate what art was about and what God's design for art was--rules for how art works. I'd read a lot of books about it and looked at different theories, some of which were helpful, but when I went back to the Scripture and looked at its art, in particular the parables and the Psalms, then I had living examples, if you will, of works of art that were authorized by God. And that gave me a point from which I could see the positive values of some people's theories as well as the negative ones. In that process, working as a Christian believing in the gospel of salvation, I came to develop an aesthetic theory. At first I was a bit schizophrenic about the whole thing because I couldn't see how I could relate to the arts as a Christian.

Now I can.

CS: Besides art, are you saying that Christians can develop theories like this for business management, economics, education, psychology, politics, the family, and so on? **JP:** Absolutely. And now there are Christian writers who can contribute to this. Whereas twenty-five years ago there wasn't much available.

CS: You and some colleagues, such as at College House, and in the year you spent in the States, have tackled such areas. **JP:** That's right. Take business. We dug around not just for some vaguely Christian moral view of business and management but something that had the gospel as its heart and how the patterns of the gospel would influence biblical themes of management. We were looking for a distinctly Christian mode of management. So, first, we started with the gospel, which meant that we looked for ways of doing management that are saving, rescuing, and liberating. We also looked into Scripture to see how people were managed and how people in authority managed the managers. Moses, for instance, is classic here. He lost his temper and it cost him dearly; he learned to delegate authority, and so on.

CS: You're talking about much more than the kind of rescuing that makes non-Christians Christian.

JP: That's right. It's equipping people to do what God wants them to do in their work. Human beings, you see, are more than just religious and moral beings. They are, for instance, also citizens, which means they live politically (even to not vote is to make a political statement). They are also social, which means they relate to one another in groups of various kinds. They use language and aesthetics. They are economic beings. And so on. No one escapes this stuff. And we have obediences to fulfill before God in these areas, to make rescues there, if I could put it like that. If you think you can do politics simply by using morality, then you will end up violating God's authority in the political realm. The same is true for any of the other aspects. God has His own way of ordering them, and if we're going to have a wisdom based on the fear of the Lord, we've got to bring more than the Bible's religious and moral values to bear on them.

The problem is that you cannot pass laws, for instance, telling people that they must love one another or else. What you can do, however, is pass laws that liberate people to be loving.

CS: But surely religion and morality do have a bearing on all areas of life? **JP:** Yes, indeed. But to put it simply, one's faith gives direction not only to one's morals and ethics but also to one's politics and economics and art, and so on. The problem is that you cannot pass laws, for instance, telling people that they must love one another or else. What you can do, however, is pass laws that liberate people to be loving. For example, laws that make medical professionals nervous or afraid about helping an injured person they may come across on the street, or someone who has been involved in a serious accident, are not liberating laws.

CS: But the Bible doesn't give us fully developed theories of business, economics, politics, or art. So how may we depend on Scripture in these aspects then? **JP:** The Bible provides samples, not exhaustive treatments. It's St. Paul, for instance, stating that "these things happen for our example." Now the samples from Scripture are different from samples found elsewhere in that they are authoritative for the Christian. After all, outside of Scripture, you don't know what you're getting. I would say that God's purpose in the Old Testament was to create a sample of how He would order a culture and its history in a fallen world. The glory of this is that it does this by taking sin and sinners seriously. Most "good advice" assumes that you haven't sinned. And this is one of the problems of nonbiblical secular theories. If there's no sin, there's no redemption, no true liberty. So something quite fundamental gets left out of the picture. Christian theories of these things wouldn't do that.

CS: Can you give us an example from Scripture? **JP:** How about, instead of looking at the Story of Naboth's Vineyard as a purely moral lesson, we see it also as instructing us politically. This could help us to see, for instance, how the fear of the god you serve influences your politics in quite practical ways. So you've got Jezebel, whose wisdom is based on the fear of a Baal, and this wisdom gives her a certain politics regarding the land, which has a pretty drastic consequence for Naboth. Elijah then comes along with a wisdom based on the fear of the Lord, which gives him a certain view of politics with regard to the land, and he rebukes both Jezebel and Ahab, who's caught in the middle. Ahab makes political decisions--as ruler!--according to the most appealing argument. This can help us determine the different gods that rule different ways of thinking about politics. So, if you've got a nation whose politics is based on dialectical materialism, or on life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness . . . Samples from the lives of Joseph and Daniel are also quite illuminating.

CS: This is fascinating, isn't it, because folk like Joseph and Daniel held distinguished careers in high political offices. Yet they don't seem to have beat their fellow politicians or their constituencies over the head with their own standards of personal morality, and they obviously had quite a different way of looking at life than we do. And God seemed okay with that. **JP:** Yes. This is bristling with all sorts of issues, like what one writer calls "responsible compromise." So, Daniel, for example, is prepared to receive instruction in spiritistic areas and he's willing to carry the name of a Baal, which must have been a constant thorn in the side, but he's not willing to compromise in the matter of food. For him, that was his sticking point.

CS: His sticking point? **JP:** Yes. We all must have them. When you know what your's are ? they're a matter of conscience under the fear of the Lord ? then you can do responsible compromise. It will be different for different people. Further, you can have areas of responsible compromise only if you first know where you'll say, ?This far, no farther.?

CS: You're saying that as Christians we can use this principle under God. **JP:** Yes, as God's people have always done. And alongside it is the vital thing, for instance for Old Testament politics, that it was not so much the structure of the politics that mattered, so much as it was the tacit agreement between the people and the rulers that they are going to obey the word of the Lord. That's the key to biblical kinds of politics. The problem with a modern democracy, I would say, is that it is more a demagoguery. Candidates tend to appeal not to people's consciences but to their desires. There should be a common assumption between the candidate and his constituency that his business in politics is to obey the Law of the Lord.

CS: Sounds like you're calling us to get to know the Bible as a ?secular? book. **JP:** You could put it like that. One of the beauties of the thing is that this kind of thinking lets you talk about your family, your business, your politics, your art, and so on from many points of view under God. You are not limited to the religious and moral ways of seeing, as important as these are. We must be obedient to God in the way we live our public lives. And the Book can show us how.

*College House ran for nearly three decades. The Greenbelt Festival is nearing its 40th anniversary. It draws 20,000 people over the four-day bank holiday weekend at the end of August.

**The book, *The Gospel and the New Spirituality*, was eventually published and went on to become a go-to source for several institutions and is still required reading at Covenant Theological Seminary.

This interview makes a nice companion piece to the one with Elaine Storkey.

The ideas in this interview, and many, many others, are developed in some depth in the book *Uncommon Sense*.

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