

# **Management by Proverbs**

**Scriptural Wisdom for Superior Results**

**Michael Zigarelli**



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*Management by Proverbs*  
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by Michael Zigarelli

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 978-1-60791-017-6

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# Table of Contents



<b>Introduction: Why Manage by Proverbs? .....</b>	<b>ix</b>
<b>Part I: Lay a Foundation for Success.....</b>	<b>27</b>
Principle 1: Maintain a Biblical Worldview .....	29
Principle 2: Devote Your Work to the Real Boss .....	41
Principle 3: Be Humble.....	49
Principle 4: Assemble an Accountability Group.....	59
Principle 5: Prioritize Family over Work.....	69
Part I Case Study: <i>The Case of “Successful” Sam</i> .....	79
<b>Part II: Excel at the Essentials.....</b>	<b>87</b>
Principle 6: Think of Profit as a Means, Not an End.....	89
Principle 7: Plan Persistently .....	99
Principle 8: Design a Decision Tree.....	115
Principle 9: Execute with Excellence .....	125
Principle 10: Perfect Your People Skills .....	135
Part II Case Study: <i>When the Golden Rule         Yields No Gold</i> .....	149

<b>Part III: Build a Competitive Workforce .....</b>	<b>155</b>
Principle 11: Measure Twice, Hire Once .....	157
Principle 12: Provide a Realistic Job Preview .....	169
Principle 13: Select a Like-Minded Management Team .....	179
Principle 14: Invest in Employee Training .....	187
Part III Case Study: <i>How Gay-Friendly         Should Your Workplace Be?</i> .....	195
<b>Part IV: Cultivate a Culture of Commitment.....</b>	<b>203</b>
Principle 15: Build Organizational Trust .....	205
Principle 16: Relieve Employee Stress .....	217
Principle 17: Value Employee Input .....	227
Principle 18: Develop Employee Careers .....	237
Part IV Case Study: <i>Dictators Masquerading         as Christian Leaders</i> .....	245
<b>Part V: Measure and Reward Performance .....</b>	<b>249</b>
Principle 19: Evaluate People with Precision .....	251
Principle 20: Deliver Criticism with Care .....	263
Principle 21: Reward Employees with Praise.....	273
Principle 22: Reward Employees with Profits .....	283
Part V Case Study: <i>When a Good Worker is Poor</i> .....	295
<b>Part VI: Control Workplace Conflict.....</b>	<b>299</b>
Principle 23: Restrain Gossip.....	301
Principle 24: Ensure Due Process .....	311
Principle 25: Terminate Troublemakers.....	321
Part VI Case Study: <i>The Downsizing Dilemma</i> .....	333
<b>Epilogue: A Strategy for Continuous Improvement ...</b>	<b>337</b>

## Principle 1

# Maintain a Biblical Worldview



Joe and Carl have been co-workers for a long time, and they both would tell you that they're Christians, but they think very differently about God.

For example, Joe believes that God exists in three persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—and that He created the world and watches over it. Carl used to believe that too, but today he'd probably say that we can't know very much about God, at least not with certainty.

Joe claims that it's possible not only to know about God but also to know His will, since God reveals Himself through Scripture, through His creation, through prayer, and most of all, through the person of Jesus Christ. Carl used to believe all that too, but now, deep down, he thinks that it's arrogant for someone to claim that he or she really *knows* God's will. Instead, what we can know for sure is what's observable in this world—what we can experience through our senses.

What does any of this have to do with management, the topic of this book? Only everything. You see, Joe and Carl's different worldviews have *temporal* implications, not just eternal ones. Most basically, there's the issue of "the right thing to do." For Joe, there is such a thing as absolute right and wrong: It's based on God's character and God's

Word, and it applies to everyone. For Carl, right and wrong are relative concepts that can change with situations and persons. Why? Because if God isn't knowable, then there's no absolute basis for ethics—no objective standard of right and wrong that applies across-the-board.

Now, that doesn't mean that Carl's a bad person or that he has no sense of right and wrong. He certainly does. But for Carl, "the right thing to do" in any given situation isn't determined by an ancient Book or by "God's will"; it comes from elsewhere, as we'll see later in this chapter.

There are further implications of Joe and Carl's disparate worldviews, and they see those implications in a lot of their meetings. These guys are both sharp businessmen and they agree on many things, but they often come down on opposite sides of important decisions. For example, they disagree on the legitimacy of using scantily-clad models in the company's advertising. They disagree on how much to disclose in quarterly reports and in budget negotiations. And they disagree quite a bit on how much responsibility the company has toward its employees.

Again, that's not to say that Joe's an angel or that Carl beats his wife. But what's perplexing to Joe is that when he and Carl were hired 15 years ago, Carl was a sold-out believer. Now it seems that Carl's sold-out to the corporate culture.

How did this transformation happen to Carl? There were probably a lot of contributing factors. But the timeless Book of Proverbs provides some timely insight into how we can avoid it.

### **Proverbs on Maintaining Our Worldview**

Carl's drift from God illustrates a pervasive problem in human history—a problem addressed three millennia ago in this cornerstone scripture:

*Above all else, guard your heart,  
for it is the wellspring of life  
(Proverbs 4:23)*

As I'm sure you know, this is not a call to a healthy heart regimen of eating right, exercising, and getting enough fiber. It's a call to something even more important: A transformed life, from the inside out. It's a call to get the internals right first so the externals will be right.

Throughout the Bible, its authors use "heart" as a metaphor to describe the innermost core of a person—his or her *essence* which governs every attitude, priority, and choice. For example, we read in Exodus that because of his hardened and calloused heart, Pharaoh refused to free the Israelite slaves (4:21), refused to listen to Moses and Aaron (7:3-4), and later pursued Israel into the Red Sea (14:4). In 1 Kings, we read that after Solomon received a "wise and discerning heart" (1 Kings 3:12), he made a decision so shrewd that we're still talking about it (the threat to split the baby in half, 1 Kings 3:16-28). And most notably, in Matthew's gospel, Jesus tells us directly about the connection between our "heart" and our actions: "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander" (Matthew 15:19; cf. also Mark 7:18-23).

Today, our term of choice for this innermost core is not "heart," but "worldview." The concept is the same, though, and it's a profound truth that we simply must remember: *As we think, so we do*. To live christianly, we must think christianly. Or, as Nancy Pearcey says so well: "morality is always derivative—it stems from an underlying worldview."<sup>1</sup>

This is why God cares so much about what's at our core. It's "the wellspring of life," according to the proverb, or, as translated in other Bible versions, it's the "source of life" (HCSB) or "where life starts" (*The Message*). That's why

God urges us to “guard our heart”—our worldview—from conformity and corruption. When we don’t, we drift.

That’s not a difficult thing to understand, but guarding our heart can be a *very* difficult thing to do in this day and age. Whether you realize it or not, there is a daily battle going on for your “heart,” a battle to secularize your worldview, and stakes couldn’t be higher. It’s to that battle that we turn next.

### **A Biblical Versus Secular Worldview**

“Worldview” may be a new or esoteric term to you, but the concept is reasonably straightforward. In plain English, a worldview is the totality of our beliefs about God, about the world, and about the relationship between the two. It’s the lens through which we interpret and make sense of everything around us. And while that may sound far removed from the practical concerns of the workplace and of management, like Joe and Carl, our presuppositions about these issues are inextricably linked to our day-to-day behavior and decision-making.<sup>2</sup>

Let’s look first, albeit simplistically, at what’s called a “Biblical worldview.” A person with a Biblical worldview, like Joe, is one who affirms the fundamentals of the faith as expressed in the Bible. That entails, for instance, the belief that there is one creator God who is both *transcendent* (i.e., over and above the world) and *immanent* (i.e., involved in the world) and who reveals Himself and His will in myriad ways. It further entails belief in the storyline of creation, fall and redemption as described from Genesis through Revelation, a storyline well-articulated in the longstanding creeds of the Christian faith (e.g., the Nicene Creed and the Apostles Creed). Overall, a Biblical worldview, as the term implies, maintains that the Bible is God-inspired truth, intended for us to live out faithfully each day.

There are, of course, many other worldviews represented in our culture. Some, like the Biblical perspective, are monotheistic (e.g., the worldviews of Judaism and Islam); some are pantheistic (e.g., New Age and some eastern religions); some are atheistic, insisting that there is no supreme being; and still others are agnostic, maintaining that the nature and even the existence of God is ultimately beyond our knowledge.

Each of these stands in contrast to a Biblical worldview, but it's this latter category with which we should be most concerned when it comes to guarding our hearts. Typically called "secularism," this is the *dominant* worldview in western culture, say expert observers of society. As such, it's the chief competitor to a Biblical worldview. It is, in fact, the worldview that hijacked Carl's "heart" and it is no less a threat to each one of us.

The less we know about secularism, the greater the threat becomes, so let's look closely at what it is and how it manifests itself. First of all, *secularism is the belief that God is unknowable and as such, ultimate truth is unknowable*. Now, I recognize that words like that might resurrect bad memories from some philosophy class you took once upon a time, but don't let it be an obstacle to your understanding here. A lot depends on how well we know this powerful and pervasive enemy.

Theologian and philosopher R.C. Sproul suggests just how pervasive it is: "For the secularist, there is no ultimate answer because there is no ultimate truth...It's a message that's being proclaimed, indeed *screamed*, from every corner of our culture."<sup>3</sup> Survey evidence from culture-watchers like George Barna and George Gallup, Jr. confirms that the screaming is penetrating deeply. To cite just one example, in a 2002 poll, Barna asked more than 1,000 adult Americans whether they believed that there are moral absolutes that are unchanging or that moral truth is relative to the situation. By

a 3-to-1 margin (64% vs. 22%) adults said truth is always relative to the person and their situation.<sup>4</sup>

That's three Carl's for every one Joe. In your workplace, the ratio might be even worse. But does that really matter on Monday morning? As we'll see next, it would be hard to overstate its influence.

### **How Secular Thinking Drives Decision-Making Where You Work**

Secularism has many children, so to speak—descendant worldviews that are a little different from one another, but that all share the same parent assumption that *God is unknowable, so truth is unknowable*. You may be familiar with some of secularism's progeny: humanism, existentialism, hedonism, relativism, pluralism, and so forth. It's an ornate family tree. And each branch of that tree represents how millions of people think, how they determine right and wrong, how they make decisions, and how they live.

Two of these branches loom largest in the American workplace; it's on these two that we hang most of our decisions. They have fancy names in academic circles—"pragmatism" and "empiricism"—but if you've been in the workplace for any significant amount of time, you'll quickly recognize these branches and their fruit.

#### *Pragmatism: Making Decisions Based on "What Works"*

Pragmatism is a type of secular thinking that says the "right" thing to do in any given situation is that which "works" to solve a problem. It's the expedient course of action, the one we see as most likely to generate the results we want. Identify the problem, fix the problem, move on. And if that solution happens to create other problems down the road, declares the pragmatist, we'll deal with those later.

Examples abound. From creating a marketing strategy to recruiting an all-star executive team to improving cash flow to making operations more efficient, the right thing to do is the thing that works to get the job done.

What's wrong with being pragmatic? Nothing, *per se*. In fact, it's part of the genius of the United States, empowering us to solve tough economic, social, and technological problems better than anyone else over the past century. It's the only worldview that's actually indigenous to the U.S. (we've imported most of the others from Europe), and many think that it explains why we're a world leader.

The problem comes when being pragmatic weaves its way into our "heart"—when it becomes our worldview, our ultimate arbiter of right and wrong. When that happens we're at great risk of becoming Carl, a "Christian" manager who fudges some numbers to make his department look good or to secure a bigger budget, who uses lust in advertising because sex sells, who makes decisions that are short-term quick fixes but may undermine the long-term mission, who coaches his sales reps shade the truth so they'll close more deals, who piles more onto his overworked employees rather than replace a person who just quit. To Carl, operating this way is just smart business in a competitive environment, and anyone who says otherwise is oblivious to reality. After all, business is business and he's being paid to get the job done.

That's just a small taste of the bitter fruit of pragmatism, a secular substitute for a Biblical worldview. Rather than filter ideas through God's perspective, the pragmatist filters ideas for their "cash value." Does it pay to go in this direction? Will it work? Is there a positive return on investment? Then let's do it. Whether the end goal in itself is "right," or whether there's a broader purpose that might be compromised by our actions isn't really considered. Those types of concerns—which are primary for a Bible-believing

manager—are eclipsed by a pragmatist’s incessant quest to solve the problem.

Of course, this fixation on short-run problem solving has also created problems in public policy, in the household, in churches, in people’s personal lives, and so on. You may know that first-hand. But the central point here is that, especially in the United States and especially in management, we need to guard our hearts from making decisions based foremost on “what works.” When pragmatism becomes our worldview, we build our organization and our career on a foundation other than the one God has laid.

*Empiricism: Making Decisions Based on “What’s Provable”*

Another important worldview descending from secularism is what is called “empiricism.” Again, despite the cryptic name, the concept is intuitive. In a nutshell, this way of thinking says that we should make our decisions based primarily on evidence and scientific proof.

We can see the manifestations in every functional area of business. Whether we’re reorganizing the company’s portfolio or ascertaining demand for a new product or evaluating the prudence of a profit-sharing plan, “show me the data” is the mantra of today’s decision-maker. We want evidence—hard, empirical evidence—that A causes B before we will invest in A. And the greater the cost of A, the more convincing the evidence must be.

The explosion of academic studies, consulting company surveys, and corporate in-house research programs in the last seventy years bears testimony to the value we place on empiricism. But we should again be clear: Being data-driven is not a bad thing, per se. In fact, collecting data before making decisions is an essential element of good stewardship because it helps us channel resources efficiently.

So what's the problem? It's not in seeking and using data, of course; the problem comes when this sort of thinking sits on the throne of our heart. Legions of "rational" managers, many Christians among them, are simply more convinced by research than they are by anything else—including the claims of God as expressed in Scripture. Because theological claims are not "provable," says the person beholden to this worldview, those claims have no place in our decision-making process.

To make this a little more concrete, consider again the question of whether we should use a sexy ad campaign. How does a person with an empirical worldview make the decision? It's straightforward. If the research shows that the campaign will sell more product (i.e., if the focus groups and the experience of similar campaigns says do it), then the empiricist on one side of the table agrees with the pragmatist on the other side of the table. They're close cousins, after all. Meanwhile, poor Joe, the guy with the Biblical worldview, is relegated to arguing from the margin. Even if he has the courage to speak up, surely any appeal to Jesus' words on lust would be laughable in that venue.<sup>5</sup> If God is unknowable, then Jesus is just another opinion, the Bible is just another old book, and standards of right and wrong must be found elsewhere. For the Carl's around the table, marinated for years in a societal and corporate culture, those standards are more often found in science than theology.

### **Winning the Battle for Your Heart**

"Above all else," Proverbs says, "guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life." In the twenty-first century, if we're not proactive about protecting ourselves, we're at significant risk of cultural conformity. And that conformity doesn't just happen when we're consciously polluting our minds. More

frequently and more insidiously, the slow but steady transformation happens without our knowledge or our permission.

It can happen when we see dozens of ads per day implying the good life comes from owning more stuff. It can happen when we listen to music whose lyrics normalize profanity, drug use, and casual sex. It can happen when we watch television shows that somehow get us to cheer for revenge, deception, and murder. It can happen when Hollywood gets us to empathize with a movie character whose lifestyle dishonors God.

It can happen when we hear pop stars, politicians, and professors insist that people have the right to do whatever makes them happy. It can happen when we read advice columns that implore us to first “look out for number one.”

It can happen when too many of the people we hang around with think of table prayers as “talking to your plate.” It can happen when TV talk show hosts and best-selling authors assure us that everyone goes to heaven. It can even happen in church when a pastor preaches low-cost Christianity, fearing that if he’s too tough on people, they won’t come back next week.

Most germane to this book, the transformation from a Biblical to a secular worldview can happen through management education that takes as its starting point that profit is paramount. It can happen after years of working in a place where the norm is to base decisions on “what works” and “what’s provable,” rather than on what’s right. And it can happen when too many of the business books, magazines and Web sites we read assume that our Sunday God is not relevant on Monday.

You see, when we live and work in a secularized culture, the transformation of our worldview—of our most basic assumptions about who God is and how we should live—happens invisibly and it happens inevitably...unless, that is, we *actively guard against it*.

What does that mean in practical terms? In one sense, forewarned is forearmed. If we remain aware of the threat to our worldview, we'll be more likely to resist some of the secular brainwash. But for most of us, awareness won't be enough. For most of us, guarding our heart will mean being *intentional* about the guarding.

One way to do this is by leveraging this same cause-and-effect process to our advantage. What I mean is this: If our environment can powerfully pull our worldview in a secular direction, it can also pull it in a sacred direction. We just need to make some adjustments in our lifestyle so that we take in more of the right messages and fewer of the wrong ones.

We can, for example, get in the habit of surrounding ourselves with more wholesome music and of watching less toxic TV shows and movies. We might make a practice of downloading Christian-oriented podcasts and books and listening to those during our commute. More broadly, we can make wiser choices about everything we access on the Internet, as well as about what we read, about the conversations we have, and about the company we keep.

If possible, we might choose Christian education for ourselves and our kids, rather than secular education. We can go to Christian conferences and retreats, not just the standard professional conferences in our field. And most importantly, we can spend lots of time at a solid Bible-believing church and with the God whom they serve.

There are other things we can do, too, as we'll see in Principle 4 and in the Epilogue to this book, but the main point is that *cultural conditioning flows both ways*. It can help us as well as hurt us. If we'll get intentional about exposing ourselves to a healthier culture, we'll maintain a healthier "heart."

Now, please don't misunderstand me. Guarding our heart does not mean *escaping* from the secular culture and

insulating ourselves in a Christian bubble. To be effective witnesses, as God wants us to be, we need to be in the world but not of it. So guarding our heart doesn't mean giving away our TV, canceling our subscription to *Harvard Business Review*, quitting our job to work in the church, or telling our non-Christian friends to take a hike. It does mean, though, that we recognize we're in a daily battle, that the enemy is powerful and invisible, and that to win this battle we must "above all else" co-labor with God to maintain a Biblical worldview.

### **For Reflection and Discussion**

1. What is a worldview and why does it matter? What's the basic difference between a Biblical and a secular worldview?
2. Think about how you've made decisions at work. How much have you been affected by the worldviews of pragmatism and empiricism? Are you at risk of becoming a "Carl"?
3. A fundamental premise of this chapter is that *as we think, so we do*—that living christianly requires thinking christianly. How have you seen this connection in your own life?
4. What will you do from this point forward to "guard your heart"?