

Brett McCracken

## **The Wisdom Pyramid: Feeding Your Soul in a Post-Truth World**

Wheaton: Crossway, 2021, 188 pp.

Most of you will probably remember the Food Pyramid from your Primary or High School textbooks in subjects such as Biology. The author uses that common memory and skillfully attempts to draw our attention to the Christian pyramid of living and eating in the world of post-truth, where facts are no longer valid and feelings are crucial, and where our information “diet” is so poor that it endangers Christians’ lives and perception. The cover represents an important part of the book, as it places the Bible at the bottom of the pyramid. Above it, we find the Word, followed by the church, nature (creation), books (reading), and beauty (art), while at the tip of the pyramid, we find the internet and social media. The book deals with ways to live wisely in our modern times, offering a proper diet that can help our perception and wisdom to become clearer in a world overflowing with information and content that is hard to digest.

The book will be easier to understand if we look at its author. Namely, Brett McCracken is the Senior Editor and Director of Communications for The Gospel Coalition, as well as the author of *Uncomfortable*, *Hipster Christianity* and *Gray Matters*. He earned his M.A. at Wheaton College and the University of California in Los Angeles. He is also a film critic, editor, and writer whose articles appeared in publications such as *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, *Huffington Post*, *CNN.com*, *Christianity Today*, and others. Brett McCracken’s writing is relevant, very much aware of today’s world, and offers an interesting perspective on culture and Christian life.

This book contributes to the picture of seeing Christian life as wise living. It is divided into two big sections. However, before we embark on discussing these sections, we should consider the introduction chapter, called *An Unwise Age*. There, the author expresses concern over our information intake from the world around us. He poses that, as Christians, we should live a healthier life, feeding ourselves with better information, precisely to be wise amidst a world that needs a cure. Our world is saturated with information on the Internet and social media. The truth has lost its validity – it has been relativized and defined more through emotions and personal feelings than through facts. Society has become lonely, sickly, and undiscerning. The author writes, “Our world has more and more information, but less and less wisdom. More data; less clarity. More stimulation; less synthesis. More distraction; less stillness. More pontificating; less pondering. More opinion; less research. More speaking; less listening. More to look at; less to see. More amusements; less joy. There is more, but we are less” (p. 11).

According to McCracken, we eat too much, we eat too fast and we only eat what suits us. Of course, the food here is a metaphor for our information intake.

We need a healthier diet to be the salt and the light – not by abandoning the world, but by learning how to live in it.

The first section of the book is called *Sources of Our Sickness*, and it contains three chapters. The first chapter, *Information Gluttony*, discusses the overwhelming intake of information that we are not able to process. We jump from one piece of information to the other, not paying real attention to any of it. We are buried under piles of social media, smart devices, and watches, which are as helpful as they are unhelpful, because they make us susceptible to anxiety and stress, and cause disorientation and fragmentation. In other words, we are all over the place. This causes us to become impotent in our real lives, while we take care of virtual reality. We are paralyzed in our commitments and decision-making because there is too much to choose from. We constantly choose the easy way out and that which is not challenging. The author goes on to conclude that “the desire to know everything only leads to grief” (p. 37).

In the second chapter, *Perpetual Novelty*, McCracken introduces us to the speedy intake of information. This chapter contains numerous facts that reveal how we function in the world of an overwhelming flow of information. The author explains why we constantly want something new, why we are forced to be up to date with everything, and how our brain cannot quickly process what we take in through reading and watching. We keep thinking that we need to be present and are quick to believe *fake news*, precisely because we do not take time to verify the information. In other words, we are wandering and lost, and just following what is offered to us, while that which is offered is fleeting, because we already must chase after what is in front of us, what is “newest”. Instead, the author writes in this chapter, we should slow down and realize that it is biblically wise to live slower.

The third chapter in this first section is called “*Look Within*” *Autonomy* because false information in effect turns us into sources of information. We only rely on ourselves, we are experts in everything (the author says that this became especially apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic), we have contradictory stances and have become disembodied beings that find their reality in virtual reality. Virtual reality has a great effect on us – it makes us ignore our bodies the way they are (here the author touches on sex change and gender identity problems) and we do not see people the way they are: “If the ‘personhood’ or the ‘real self’ is not fundamentally connected to the physical body, it can be easy to claim that mere bodies (e.g., fetuses or people on feeding tubes) are not ‘persons’ in any sense worth fighting for” (p. 57). He goes on to say, “Disconnection from the realities of the physical world makes it easier to ignore the physical body in the conception of self” (p. 59). The author concludes that we will end up having only our truth instead of researching it and accepting it with gratitude.

In the introductory chapter of the second section of the book, called *Sources of Truth for a Life of Wisdom*, the author introduces us to the concept of the pyramid

which we described at the beginning and will continue to consider in the rest of this review. McCracken here says that wisdom is not about acquiring plenty of knowledge, having all the data, or knowing all the answers, but about humbly acknowledging God and submitting to his authority. The author states that God's wisdom is wisdom that is centered on God. He is the standard in everything and the key to our progress and a life with proper discernment (p. 67). *The Wisdom Pyramid* is only a suggested way of life, and not some guru guide, and the very structure of this pyramid differs from the food pyramid in that the two foundations (the Word and the church) are irreplaceable, while the other parts of the pyramid are indicators of truth that serve to show us how to have a better and healthier knowledge. The author's goal is to show how to live a more truthful and wiser life and look for it even outside his book. The first chapter in the second section, but the fourth chapter of the book is called *The Bible*, which is the foundation for everything:

The Bible is our most important source of wisdom because it is literally the eternal God – the standard and source of all truth – revealing himself. What a miraculous thing! Yet sadly many of us are bored by it, struggling to read it habitually, if at all. Our Bibles collect dust in a dark corner of our rooms while our Facebook feeds are constantly refreshed. When most of us start our days (myself included!), we read emails and tweets before we read the words of God (p. 73).

The author takes some time to talk about the authority of Scripture, the work of the Holy Spirit together with God's Word, and gives us several principles for correctly handling Scripture: Scripture speaks to all of life, Scripture defines our paradigm, Scripture is always valuable as a whole, and not just some parts. Then, he states that Scripture should motivate us to worship and obey, but also says that we will not always understand everything in it. The Word is a gift we should hold in higher esteem. In the chapter called *The Church*, the author speaks about the importance of a community in the world of individualism. He believes that true wisdom is biblical wisdom, wherein we are not at the centre, but God is. Inside a community, we sharpen ourselves, embed ourselves and encounter things we might usually avoid. The church is the place where we reside, unlike virtual reality (where we are omnipresent) and the church is a place of continuity in a world that is constantly changing.

In the next chapter, *The Nature*, the author deals with what Calvin calls “the second book” of God, and that is creation, which can be harsh but also benevolent. It is created to point to God and his wisdom, and not to be wisdom in itself. Interestingly, the author writes: “Nature's glory is not an end unto itself. It's not a god to worship. It's a prism and amplifier of God's glory. It's a theater, a canvas, a cathedral, but God is always at center stage” (p. 103). We observe our position in nature, while our comparison to God's greatness humbles us before him. The author continues by emphasizing nature which he sees as a display of God's

beauty, even when it is destructive. We are part of nature, part of God's creation, but, unlike the rest of creation, we are the only ones with a conscience. He concludes that the creation is given to us by God, and, as such, must be respected and looked after.

The next subject the author takes on is *Books*, where he returns to the first foundation, Scripture, as the basis for everything else. Books help us to be "quick to listen, slow to speak" and thus enable us to be connected to others, while also building our knowledge. Unlike pictures and videos, books and words are thought-out and precise. Books offer us new perspectives. However, this is not only true of new books, but also old books which have stood the test of time and have been proven good and valid. The author says: "Reading books reminds us we are permeable creatures, by nature open to influence, and that this is how we grow" (p. 123). However, the question is, how are we to read? First, by reading old books (C. S. Lewis suggests reading one old book for every three new books). Then, by reading books that challenge our worldview (and force us to think critically), and finally, by reading what we enjoy. In all this, we should read everything through the lens of the Word.

Close to the top of the pyramid, we find the chapter called *The Beauty*, which can be felt, smelled, seen, heard, tasted, and touched. What is it about the things of this world that move our hearts? The author says that it is God. God is the standard of beauty (p. 132) and beauty bears witness to him. Beauty does not only encapsulate our mind but also our senses, our being, and our heart. Key elements of beauty are contrast and tension. The author goes on to say that beauty quiets us down, gives us rest, and finally leads and points us to worship. At the top of the pyramid, we find *The Internet and Social Media*. We cannot live outside this world, because its darkness needs to be enlightened. The Internet gives us access to knowledge, provides us with a platform to speak from, and opens access to proven and "digested" information. However, how should we behave *online*? McCracken counsels that we go with a purpose, search for quality, slow down, approach things that challenge our worldview, and share what is good. Internet should not be abandoned but redeemed (p. 154).

In the last chapter, the author will pose the following question, *What Wisdom Looks Like?* McCracken recommends that we should be discerning in our "eating habits," patient in a world of fast information, as well as humble in a world that is focused on itself. Wisdom is not focused on us, but subject to outside authority. Freedom of wisdom is not a freedom "from," but a freedom "to" (pp. 161–162). By looking to God, listening to him, and loving him, we conclude that a life of wisdom will, echoing the Reformers' call, give all glory to God. *Soli Deo Gloria!*

Critically thinking about the book, we might say that it comes at an opportune time. It is relevant and corresponds to the spirit of the times we live in. It is short, but it does not only talk about "how" to live a Christian life in today's world but

about “which glasses” we should use to see and live our Christian lives. The book answers all current problems by quoting secular authors and research, as well as Christian theologians, and leads the reader to an application through the use of Scripture. McCracken strikes a good balance between quoting secular sources and Christian writers (Evangelical and Roman Catholic), from recent and sometimes patristic history. His approach is not fundamentalist, or divisive, but a call for a different look at God’s Kingdom and his creation.

Although the book initially takes a negative stance toward the world we live in, McCracken successfully lays proper foundations for arguments about gluttony and satiety on display in today’s world. However, the question for him is not how to run away from this world, but how to stay calm and collected in it. That is our challenge today, i.e., how to stay calm and sober, or rather, how to become wise in a world where wisdom is misunderstood for a large quantity of information. McCracken will say: “Change your eating habits!” The author also changes our perspective on God’s possession which has been created and given to us, and of which we are included.

McCracken’s approach is holistic. The book has the potential to expand into a broader philosophical work about Christian life in the modern world. It must be observed that while reading the book, we are not under the impression that it was written to persuade us in a fundamentalist way. Rather, it calls us to think biblically about God’s world and see the potential he offers Christians for a life of wisdom. The book is neither “black and white” nor liberal, but liberating and inspiring because it recognizes God’s hand in everything.

Although the author has a great handle on different arguments and observations, the book could have been written using a different chapter method. Here I refer to the concept of the pyramid. The pyramid might not have been the wisest method, precisely because it is a borrowed and old concept. Of course, as we have mentioned, the purpose of McCracken’s pyramid is different (it does not contain something bad). Perhaps a different style might have provided a better approach to these themes because the pyramid is not “that popular” today. But, again, perhaps the author employed it as a grid for the chapters to systematically explain the purpose of every layer. McCracken has the potential for an even better Christian and philosophical writing style, and we can expect more of his solid works on the subject of Christian life in the postmodern world.

In conclusion, this book was written in a simple style, and it is by no means just another popular Christian book. It is a book for everyone – from academics to students, from pastors to laity, and finally – for every believer. It is a call to a better, more substantial life based on Scripture, inside the church, involved in the reaching of this world that belongs to God. Modern time is not the time when we think that wisdom has reached its pinnacle, but a time in need of true wisdom. Only by living wisely in a way that is relevant and well spent, the way this book

describes, and by giving our voices to the culture we live in through the gospel we have experienced and which we proclaim, we will contribute to God's world that requires renewal. That is why I recommend this book – because it directs us to the Book through which we discover how to think and act in God's way in a world that only has its way.

Matej Sakač

David F. Ford

**The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary**

Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021, 484 pp.

Commentaries are a rather interesting genre of writing. Their whole purpose is to follow the arguments and ideas of *another* book, usually a book from antiquity that is culturally and chronologically distant to modern readers, to explain it, and in some sense update it for contemporary readers. For Christian readers, and especially pastors, teachers, and scholars, biblical commentaries are a staple on the bookshelf, attesting to the primary importance of scripture. And yet, there are different kinds of commentaries or sub-genres of biblical commentary, and certainly different ways of using commentaries (for teaching and preaching, spiritual discipline, devotional reading), a point I will return to at the conclusion. While the genre distinctions are not always clear cut and there is plenty of overlap, there are nevertheless important distinctions. There are historical-critical and exegetical commentaries that are sometimes quite technical and aimed at the scholar; other commentaries that are still primarily exegetical but briefer and less technical than those of the above category so they can be more accessible and used by a wider audience; pastoral or “application” commentaries or something similar, which put added emphasis on the relevance and use of the biblical text for the contemporary world and in church communities, and devotional commentaries that are penned for the general laity. Commentaries may be further categorized along confessional lines or particular theological traditions.<sup>1</sup>

A newer movement in commentary writing (though reflecting a much older movement) is the “theological commentary” on the biblical text, which is the sub-genre within which falls the commentary under the current review. For the uninitiated, this may seem redundant. Aren't all biblical commentaries by necessity

1 These distinctions can be seen on the helpful website [bestcommentaries.com](http://bestcommentaries.com), which lists and ranks commentaries for each biblical book, and tags each commentary as “pastoral,” “technical,” or “devotional.” Other tags indicate the theological confession or approach of the writer. Most commentaries are given multiple tags demonstrating much the usual overlap.