



SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

**AN INTRODUCTION TO
CHRISTIAN BELIEF**

JOHN M. FRAME

FOREWORD BY J. I. PACKER

“Wonderfully clear, refreshingly insightful, profoundly biblical. . . .
An outstanding achievement!” —Wayne Grudem

SEMINARY LEADERS

“All good theology is practical. Proper theology is for the church, not just for academics. Biblical systematic theology impacts the way we think, the way we live, and the way we feel about God, ourselves, the world, and others. John Frame always does ‘good’ theology. It will change your life.”

—**Robert C. (Ric) Cannada Jr.**, Chancellor Emeritus, Reformed Theological Seminary

“Many times in the past I have grown in my understanding of Scripture and benefited in my practice of ministry as a consequence of John Frame’s written reflections on God’s Word. Now the opportunity to draw upon that thought from a work that expands and systematizes his reflections from a lifetime of study and devotion is a great treasure for the church and a great gift to all in ministry.”

—**Bryan Chapell**, President Emeritus, Covenant Theological Seminary

“Theology reflects our study of God’s general and special revelation and our attempt to express that theology in the language of those to whom we seek to communicate our conclusions. Theology must be faithful to the authority of the Word of God, and must be written in an understandable style. For those reasons, John Frame has once again used his gifts to give us a systematic theology that is consistently biblical and written within the framework of Reformed theology. Familiarity with the author’s writings makes the reader aware of his ability to express himself clearly and to the point. He does not waste words or the reader’s time. You will find an immediate appreciation of and benefit from his definitions and expressions of our Reformed doctrine. While a number of outstanding systematics reside within the family of biblically Reformed theology, Frame’s will complement and deepen one’s understanding and appreciation of the ‘faith once delivered to the saints,’ yesterday and today. Without question this work will be taught and studied in a way that will enable the reader, teacher, and student to see and understand the sovereignty of God, the kingdom of God, the lordship of Christ, and salvation with fresh minds and day-to-day application. You will find Frame, as usual, demonstrating his well-known mantra, ‘theology is life and life is theology.’ Each page is a constant reminder that the truth will make us free.”

—**Charles Dunahoo**, Chairman of the Board, Westminster Theological Seminary; Coordinator for Christian Education and Publications, Presbyterian Church in America; pastor and teacher

“John Frame is an esteemed colleague and one of the most important contemporary Reformed systematic theologians in the English-speaking world. His *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* reflects a half-century of distinguished teaching, prolific writing, and serious study. For that reason alone, especially in a day and age in which many evangelicals question the legitimacy of systematic theology,

this volume commends itself to our attention. Frame (thankfully) encourages a Bible-centered approach to doing theology and (rightly) asserts that even ‘practical theology’ is a department of systematic theology. Here you will find the Professor Frame you have come to expect: clear, readable, restrained, and conversational in his presentation, and thoughtful, biblical, consistent, and careful in his views. Many years ago, Carl F. H. Henry suggested that we need a ‘recovery of Christian belief.’ May your engagement with this book serve to introduce you to and ground you in genuinely Christian belief.”

—**Ligon Duncan**, Chancellor and CEO, Reformed Theological Seminary

“John Frame is one of my favorite theologians, and his *Systematic Theology* is filled with the deep learning and warranted wisdom of a lifetime. I commend it warmly to the Lord’s people everywhere.”

—**Timothy George**, Founding Dean, Beeson Divinity School of Samford University; General Editor, Reformation Commentary on Scripture

“It is always a joyous occasion when one of God’s faithful servants of his Word produces the fruit of his many years of labor into a full-fledged systematic theology. This is no small undertaking, but in the grace of God, we in our generation are the happy recipients of just such a work from Professor John Frame. He is, by all odds, one of the best known and most respected Reformed theologians in our day. It is a special joy to see this, the quintessence of a lifetime of his study of God’s Word, and now to commend it to all the body of Christ with thanksgiving to God for his gift of Dr. John Frame to the church.”

—**Walter C. Kaiser Jr.**, President Emeritus, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

“When one thinks of modern Reformed theologians, John Frame is at the top of the list. He has the rare ability to explain complex theological truths in a manner that is simple enough for the layman and deep enough for the scholar. Moreover, his theological guidance is always wise, steady, and, more than anything else, biblical. And now we finally have the book that so many have waited for him to write—a systematic theology. This volume is a wonderful gift for the church. I cannot recommend it highly enough.”

—**Michael J. Kruger**, President, Professor of New Testament, Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte

“John M. Frame’s *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* is a remarkable achievement. It is simultaneously scholarly yet accessible, sweeping in scope but penetrating in insight, steeped in historic orthodoxy yet fresh in reflection. Frame herein develops and advances his Westminster perspective on theology and ethics, culminating in what is simply Reformed theology at its best.”

—**Peter A. Lillback**, President, Westminster Theological Seminary

“It may be said that there are levels of theologians. Most of us teach what others have written. A few will actually add creatively to others’ material. And then there are the theologians of the first class. They think at a deeper level and produce the living, vital ‘starter’ or leavening agent that the other theological artisans will ‘bake’ with. Few have been starter theologians. Certainly Karl Barth was one from the last century. But the leavening was incomplete in the opinion of the most charitable confessional Christians and tainted with deadly error in the opinion of others. John Frame is a theologian of the first class in our day. His *Systematic Theology* is not a reworking of others’ leavening, but is indeed a starter that, unlike Barth, produces a biblically faithful, untainted, deeply satisfying, and expectant Christian theology. This theology is capable of being dispatched for use as the central ingredient in a robust course of study to produce pastors—and believers of all vocations—who are tethered to the inerrant and infallible Word of God, who have a personal love for Christ Jesus our Lord, and who lead the flock of Christ to sunlit uplands where the triune God’s promises appear to reveal not only an abundant life and the assurance of life with God after death and salvation from hell, but also the golden beams of a new heaven and a new earth. John Frame’s *Systematic Theology* is thus the release of an untainted and thoroughly faithful leavening agent that will produce a starter to strengthen other theologians, train future shepherds of the church, and nourish the body of Christ for years to come. It is my honor to commend *Systematic Theology* to the church. I thank God that in this rather young new century, the first-class, original, starter theologian of our time, John Frame, is not a mere theologian of the Word, but a theologian of the propositional Word as well as the Word made flesh. We owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. Frame and to P&R Publishing for the production and release of this magisterial work.”

—**Michael A. Milton**, Fourth President/Chancellor, Reformed Theological Seminary; Presbyterian (PCA) minister; author; columnist; theologian; Army Reserve chaplain; composer

“This new systematic theology comes from one of the great theological minds of our age. John Frame’s contributions to theology are already massive and many, but now he has given the church a systematic theology. This is a very important book, and it represents a lifetime of consecrated theological reflection. This new volume promises to be an enduring contribution to evangelical theology.”

—**R. Albert Mohler Jr.**, President, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“As one who has long admired—and learned so much from—John Frame’s contributions to Reformed life and thought, I am so pleased that we now have this fine volume that gathers together the insights of a half-century of serious theological scholarship. The biblical and practical nature of his perspective makes this a refreshing and much-needed resource for all of us who care about a vital Reformed theology.”

—**Richard J. Mouw**, President, Professor of Christian Philosophy, Fuller Theological Seminary

“Biblical, clear, and cogent, John Frame moves through the loci of theology with ease and without ‘looking to the right or to the left.’ This new book is not just a cut-and-paste job from past publications. While his volume is less historical than some systematic theologies, Frame avoids bogging down in episodic intellectual controversies, without denying the importance of every ‘jot and tittle.’”

—**Andrew J. Peterson**, President, Global Education, Reformed Theological Seminary

“Few in our day champion such a vision of God as massive, magnificent, and biblical as does John Frame. For decades, he has given himself to the church, to his students, and to meticulous thinking and the rigorous study of the Bible. He has winsomely, patiently, and persuasively contended for the gospel in the secular philosophical arena, as well as in the thick of the church worship wars and wrestlings with feminism and open theism. He brings together a rare blend of big-picture thinking, levelheaded reflection, biblical fidelity, a love for the gospel and the church, and the ability to write with care and clarity.”

—**John Piper**, Chancellor, Bethlehem College and Seminary; Founder and Teacher, www.desiringGod.org

“Clear, thorough, intelligent, and fair to opposing views, John Frame’s work will now be the standard within traditional Reformed theology.”

—**Cornelius Plantinga Jr.**, President Emeritus, Calvin Theological Seminary; Senior Research Fellow, Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, Grand Rapids

“We can count on John Frame to speak of the profound complexities of biblical theology with a precision, perspicuity, and humility that represent the best tendencies of the Reformed tradition. In this work, Professor Frame gives expression to a system of belief that will serve and satisfy a variety of audiences, including the curious layperson, the young seminarian, and the experienced pastor. Never one to shy away from the difficult, thorny issues of his discipline, he explains and upholds the teaching of Scripture, even when that teaching offends modern sensibilities. I would recommend this systematic treatment to all my students.”

—**John Scott Redd Jr.**, President, Associate Professor of Old Testament, Reformed Theological Seminary, Washington, D.C.

“For decades, Professor Frame has purposefully driven scholars and students, colleagues and critics, leaders and laity to the Lord Jesus Christ and to the Scriptures. That laudable objective will be magnified for generations yet to come with the release of this, the author’s most provocative and mature theological expression. ‘Everyone else serves his best first . . . but you have reserved your best for now.’”

—**John T. Sowell**, President, Reformed Theological Seminary, Atlanta

“Any theologian who says that ‘the Bible is the most important thing’ is worth listening to. But one whose life commends his theology, as John’s does, is doubly worth listen-

ing to. This book is a gift to the church written by one who has a brilliant, discerning mind and a servant's heart. I was blessed by reading it."

—**Don Sweeting**, President, James Woodrow Hassell Professor of Church History, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando

"*Systematic Theology* is the culmination of John Frame's life's work in teaching young men who are preparing for the ministry. It is a masterful study that expresses the dogmatic method and thought of a modern Reformer. Frame's approach to systematics articulates a refined synthesis of the theological and philosophical thought of early Westminster Theological Seminary with an emphasis on contemporary religious issues. No student of theology can ignore Frame's magnum opus, which represents a modern commentary on the Reformed perspective for the third millennium. Scholars, pastors, students, and laymen who want to be well informed in modern Reformation thought must drink from the wellspring of wisdom and insight offered by this humble theologian, whose one great desire is the glory and honor of his God and teaching theology that is adaptable to the church pew."

—**Kenneth Gary Talbot**, President, Whitefield Theological Seminary

"With a half-century of teaching experience, Dr. Frame writes with an irenic lucidity that speaks clearly to students while engaging questions that animate theologians and divide denominations. Presenting theology as the application of Scripture to every area of life, Dr. Frame intends the reader to live the truth that he confesses in love. While Dr. Frame's creativity will provoke discussion among readers seeking settled conclusions, the charity of his conversation models a Christlike confession. I commend Dr. Frame's *Systematic Theology* for offering insight with humility to readers and for bringing ongoing reformation to the Reformed tradition."

—**Steven T. Vanderhill**, President, Redeemer Theological Seminary

"John Frame has added significant value to the long line of systematic theologies in print. That value emanates from his profound understanding of the Bible, steeped in personal piety. He is a theologian of the heart. The personal, transparent nature of this magnum opus distinguishes it from other systematic theologies, enabling the reader to understand and apply Scripture. A quick scan of the contents dispels any doubt about Frame's broad acquaintance with the literature of the field, but his single-minded pursuit of explaining the great message of the Bible is equally clear. Seldom does a contemporary theologian engage as he does, enriching intellectually, theologically, and spiritually."

—**Luder G. Whitlock Jr.**, Interim President, Knox Theological Seminary, Fort Lauderdale, Florida; President, Excelsis, Orlando

"Even those not as rigorously Reformed in their theology as John Frame will find great benefit in these pages. With a clear commitment to the primacy of Scripture,

lucid argumentation, cogent articulation, a love for God’s people, and a passion for God’s glory throughout all the earth, Frame has produced what should become required reading in seminary classrooms and pastors’ studies for years to come.”

—**Mark Young**, President, Denver Seminary, Littleton, Colorado

PASTORS

“Trends in contemporary theology are generally split between essential and constructive approaches. The older essentialists were committed to doing theology only according to what the Bible says, most of which has been carefully summarized in numerous historic creeds and confessions. Their contemporary standard-bearers have done their best to protect the positions of the forefathers. That cultural trends helped to provide a reactionary climate for much of what essentialists codified and continue to protect as orthodox theology is clear. But no essentialist need admit that cultural trends supplied the *raison d’être* for his theological positions. That valued role is reserved for Scripture. Against this, constructive theology presents a case for doing original theology according to the present need of each generation and of the church. But it does so by drawing heavily from the norms and values of the contiguous culture. Consequently, constructive theology will always remain open-ended. Frame’s *Systematic Theology* is unique in that it brings together both essential and constructive emphases in contemporary theology. Specifically, it represents vastly original work in theology, while at the same time it remains true to the finished Word of God and to the historic and orthodox confessional documents of Christianity. Frame is not the least bit interested in reconstructing theology. His is an effort to reconceptualize the *task* of theology along practical and pastoral lines. *Sola Scriptura* maintains the logic and coherence of his new exposition of theology, while ‘perspectivalism’ gives it its remarkable ability to explain and to apply God’s Word afresh.”

—**John Barber**, Pastor, Cornerstone PCA, Jupiter, Florida

“John Frame is one of the most seminal Reformed theologians of our age, and this is his most significant work.”

—**Mark Driscoll**, Founder, Mars Hill Church and Resurgence; Cofounder, Acts 29

“John Frame is noted for his ability to articulate clearly and with an economy of words the contours of our Christian faith. He does that in this work with particular skill. Here is a systematic theology that clearly flows from biblical exegesis, follows the biblical story line, and is faithful to the confessional convictions of the author. It is a significant work that will bless the individual believer and serve the church well.”

—**Liam Goligher**, Senior Minister, Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia

“John Frame says that he is ‘immensely thankful to God’ for the opportunity to produce this systematic theology. He is not alone: I am immensely thankful that God gave him this opportunity as well. Frame is a deep thinker and a clear communicator—a

rare combination among theologians of his stature. Here is a man who knows his church history, his philosophy, his theological systems; but he does not allow these to sidetrack him from pointing—again and again—back to the majesty of Christ in Scripture. Frame shows that theology is not an end in itself. Loving God is the goal. And Frame’s volume hits this mark.”

—**J. D. Greear**, Lead Pastor, The Summit Church, Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina

“This book is as brilliant as it is personable. Dr. Frame’s panoramic comprehension of the Bible and of various theologians’ understandings of its content is matched only by the practical, applicable style of his writing.”

—**Joel C. Hunter**, Senior Pastor, Northland—A Church Distributed, Orlando

“John Frame the author has in *Systematic Theology* captured comprehensively and with clarity what many of us have benefited from in the classroom through John Frame the professor and teacher. His biblical precision and personal passion are spread on every page, which you will quickly desire to turn in order to get to the next page as he allows and propels us to see the singular glory of the triune God revealed in his Word as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.”

—**Harry L. Reeder**, Pastor/Teacher, Briarwood Presbyterian Church, Birmingham

“Dr. Frame does it again! He’s gifted the church with another wonderful tome of applied theology. This systematic theology—an elaborate exposition of the teaching of Scripture as he understands it—brings together a lifetime of study. It reflects the emphases of his teaching and writing, revealing interaction with theologians old and new, biblically orthodox and otherwise.

“Connoisseurs of systems of theology will note the distinctive features of Dr. Frame’s method: the umbrella theme of God’s lordship, both a high view and a high use of Scripture, with application to the reader’s heart and life. Wedded to the supremacy of Scripture and recognizing both its divineness and its humanness, Dr. Frame sets his doctrinal discussion in redemptive-historical context, returns to his triperspectivalism, and models for us the much-needed counterbalancing of historic orthodoxy and biblical creativity. The result is a fresh, stimulating, courageous, yet winsome study. While disarmingly accessible, the volume succeeds both in teaching the theology of Scripture and in furthering discussion of how that theology is to be systematized. While the methodological discussion unfolds, we may fully expect Dr. Frame’s *Systematic Theology* to draw in earnest students of Scripture at all stages of learning. It is a rich treasure trove of biblical analysis, useful for personal or group study. It will prove to be a legacy that keeps on giving. I plan to return to it time and again.”

—**Tim J. R. Trumper**, Senior Minister, Seventh Reformed Church, Grand Rapids

“John Frame writes theology for those who want to use, and be used by, the Word of God. He has done his professional theologizing for many years in the context of

the preparation of young men for ministry in seminary. But more to the point, his theology's practicality springs from his understanding of the nature of theological reflection itself. When I was his student over forty years ago, he told us, 'Theology is application.' His discussions of the various loci of systematic theology always have an eye on the Holy Scriptures' power and purpose to transform the lives of the people who study them—intellectually and ethically. Anyone who reads this volume will be blessed with a more comprehensive and systematic appreciation for the teachings of the Word of God and at the same time will grow in renewing the mind and life by the Holy Spirit's speaking through the Word."

—**Roger Wagner**, Pastor, Bayview Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Chula Vista, California

MINISTRIES

"Hurray for John Frame! At a time when systematics has been shoved into a corner by biblical theology in many seminaries, John has published what I can only hope will be an alternative to that imbalance. Not since A. A. Hodge's *Outlines*, Buswell, Reymond, and Grudem has a truly substantive systematic theology appeared. I expect *Systematic Theology* to become a classic, and I look forward to its publication with the greatest anticipation."

—**Jay E. Adams**, Founder, Institute for Nouthetic Studies (INS), National Association of Nouthetic Counselors (NANC), and Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation (CCEF); Author, *Competent to Counsel*

"Systematic theology is notoriously challenging to read but even more challenging to write. I tell students that too many modern theologians have given us 'cookbooks' that feed neither the mind nor the soul. John Frame is a great evangelical exception. He has mastered the historical method, and more importantly, his readers have come to expect that biblical theology will guide his systematic theology. As he says, 'The Bible is the most important thing.' I welcome this important volume and encourage all readers of theology, especially students, to have Frame's valuable work at their side."

—**John H. Armstrong**, President, ACT3 Network; Adjunct Professor, Wheaton College Graduate School

"John Frame has written a very big book—another one. Frame's strengths are once again on display: vast scope, unshakable confidence in Scripture, carefulness and generosity, a deceptively casual style. What most stands out, though, is the open-mindedness of his project. Big as it is, Frame's work raises questions even as it answers them, and as a result it opens ever-new threads in the ongoing conversation that is the Reformed tradition."

—**Peter J. Leithart**, President, Trinity House, Birmingham, Alabama

“John Frame has given the church a superb new resource in this volume. Taking as his theme the lordship of God, Frame seeks to do what he says the good theologian always does: he states the truth not for its own sake but to build up people in the Christian faith. He incorporates much of the best of modern Reformed theologians (Van Til, Murray, etc.) and addresses the hottest topics of the day, such as the length and nature of the days of Genesis 1 and whether Scripture is inerrant. Many will take issue with one or more of Frame’s points, but all will be edified by a careful reading of this work.”

—**Samuel T. Logan Jr.**, International Director, The World Reformed Fellowship;
Special Counsel to the President, Biblical Seminary

“On my bookshelf sit numerous systematics by Charles Hodge, Louis Berkhof, Robert Reymond, and Wayne Grudem. I enjoy them all. They inform, educate, and bring clarity to different issues within Scripture. While systematics are full of precious knowledge to assist any student to better understand God and his holy Word, the reader will find none so well written, with a meekness and tenderness of heart, as Frame’s. The breadth and length and height and depth of God’s amazing love graces this volume of theology. If Edwards’s ‘Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God’ can be said to have drawn sinners to Christ, Frame’s work will be said to draw Christians even closer to understanding their Creator, God, and Lord more fully. This work is a necessity for every layman, pastor, and scholar alike.

“This systematic theology is written from and faithful to a Reformed perspective—glorifying God and his Word. As expected, Frame makes extensive reference to Scripture and the Westminster Confession of Faith, but he makes good use of other confessions, too. While Frame is careful to address numerous contemporary issues, his work directs the reader to Christ—to his salvation alone. This personalizes the text. Though it draws on ‘yesterday,’ it makes it applicable to the reader ‘today and forever’ (Heb. 13:8).”

—**Joseph R. Nally**, Theological Editor, Third Millennium Ministries

“No theologian in modern times combines (1) a simple, childlike faith in the Bible, (2) a razor-sharp analytical intellect, (3) a gift for conceptual and linguistic clarity, and (4) a love for Christ’s church and everyday Christian people more successfully than John M. Frame. All factors considered, no theologian in recent memory—not Barth, not Brunner, not Pannenberg, not Tillich, nor even the conservatives: Millard Erickson, Carl Henry, the Hodges, Francis Pieper, Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict)—measures up to Frame. He is God’s unparalleled gift to the church, and his *Systematic Theology* is a wellspring of truth in a theologically parched age.”

—**P. Andrew Sandlin**, President, Center for Cultural Leadership; Senior Pastor,
Cornerstone Bible Church, Santa Cruz

“Does the world need one more systematic theology? That depends. It doesn’t necessarily, if what you mean is another doorstop describing the contentious history of doctrines.

But it does if what you mean is systematic theology that has finally come full circle through centuries of drift from the Bible itself and from practical application, back to the early evangelists' heart for teaching God's Word for edification. When the apostle Paul was wrapping up his ministry in Ephesians, he summarized what he had done among them this way: 'You yourselves know . . . how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable' (Acts 20:18, 20). What was good enough for Paul is evidently good enough for John Frame."

—**Andrée Seu Peterson**, Senior Writer, *WORLD* magazine

"Here, at last, is John Frame's magnum opus—the fruit of fifty years of teaching theology and training ministers of the gospel. Few other contemporary theologians have influenced me as much as Dr. Frame, and I am eager to see this culmination of his theological labors under the lordship of the triune God make its way into the heads, hands, and hearts of Christians around the world."

—**Justin Taylor**, Blogger, "Between Two Worlds"

"This fresh, lucid, and doxological work illustrates the very core of John Frame's project: theology as application. Frame understands the role and place of theology in general and of systematic theology in particular—showcasing one perspective of Christ's dynamic lordship. He avoids the ditches that frequently crisscross today's paths of theological undertaking—either pining for some prior supposed golden utopian theological era (merely quoting select Reformers), on the one hand, or, on the other hand, limiting the theological exercise to a mere propositional alchemy of privatized preparatory salve for heaven alone (life here in this yucky world consists only of a transitory pilgrimage for which the triune God lacks any true concern or effect other than 'soul-winning'). No, and decidedly no. Frame understands that we have been redeemed by the One who is Lord. We have been saved body and soul *from* something *for* something. Therefore, the 'stuff in the middle'—that is, life under the Lord between the cross and the consummation—matters to the Lord here and now and thus should matter to us in all its facets, not just the spiritual ones. Theology in this sense is earthy, and marvelously so. This work is robust, yet accessible; timely, yet evergreen; and innovative, yet orthodox (notice the triad)! Accordingly, theological endeavors hereafter will never be the same because Frame has in this work passionately demonstrated truth—all to Christ's glory and the church's edification. Don't just read this book; apply it!"

—**Jeffery J. Ventrella**, Senior Counsel, Senior Vice-President, Alliance Defending Freedom

PROFESSORS

"John Frame is one of the most important evangelical theologians of our time, a deeply biblical thinker whose work has epitomized the Reformation principles of *sola Scrip-*

tura and *soli Deo gloria*. His writings have proved that Christian scholars don't have to choose between orthodoxy and originality or between profundity and perspicuity. I've long hoped that the Lord would grant Dr. Frame the opportunity and motivation to write a full-length systematic theology, and I'm delighted to see that hope now realized. This exposition of Christian doctrine is the culmination of a lifetime of careful and submissive reflection on the whole counsel of God revealed in Scripture. It will nourish both mind and heart."

—**James N. Anderson**, Associate Professor of Theology and Philosophy, Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte

"Few scholars of our generation have done as much as John Frame to combine philosophical, biblical, and confessional concerns in an overarching theological synthesis. Here at last he offers us the fruit of his lifetime's labor as a service to the church of our day and to future generations. This is a work that will edify those who read it, and they in turn will use its message to build up the church of Christ. The wealth of teaching and insight that it contains will be a blessing to many, and we can be sure that it will be mightily used of God in the days ahead."

—**Gerald L. Bray**, Research Professor of Divinity, Beeson Divinity School, Samford University

"Sometimes there is a book that is so complete, so true, so instructive, and so clear that it assumes a prominent place in one's library and stays there for years. John Frame's *Systematic Theology* is that kind of book. It is a gift to the church . . . and a gift to me. This book will be an anchor to my soul and a source for my theology and faith for the rest of my life. Get it, give it, and rejoice that John Frame wrote it!"

—**Stephen W. Brown**, Professor of Practical Theology Emeritus, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando

"How do we grow in Christ? By listening intently to God's plan and promises for us in the Bible—that's the answer. But the Bible has so many different things in it, almost all of them problematic. What do they mean, all together? For you? Even better, for us? Many helpful books out there will assist you with pieces of the puzzle, but Frame assembles everything together for you. Really, try his systematic theology and see; you will come to know your God so well, in all his love and mercy and kindness."

—**D. Clair Davis**, Professor of Church History Emeritus, Westminster Theological Seminary

"Near the end of his long and fruitful career, John Frame has given us his *chef d'oeuvre*. His *Systematic Theology* is the distillation of a life's work in reflecting on how God's Word relates to the Christian life of the simple believer. As his readers have come to expect, his chief emphasis is on the glory of God, the God who saves, the God who loves us. It would be nearly impossible to read this volume without being drawn into

fellowship and conversation with the God who is at its center. Full of quotes from poetry, traditional theology, and even hymns, this is perhaps one of the most practical systematic theologies ever penned. It belongs alongside Turretin, Hodge, Bavinck, and the other hall-of-famers in the discipline. All we can say is: thank you, John Frame!”

—**William Edgar**, Professor of Apologetics, Westminster Theological Seminary

“Our world has become one of theological confusion. Dr. Frame’s *Systematic Theology* has emerged as a refreshing and practical tool for the serious student of God’s Word. Frame brings systematic theology to life, and allows for easy integration with apologetics and other expressions of theology. By clarifying the biblical worldview, *Systematic Theology* equips us to communicate God’s Word and engage the culture with biblical truth.

“Dr. Frame’s triperspectival approach to theology is one of the greatest contributions in empowering students to understand the Bible. It allows for theological inclusiveness without compromising a high view of Scripture, and opens exciting possibilities for doing solid theology in both Western and non-Western contexts. No theological library would be complete without *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief*.”

—**Carl F. Ellis Jr.**, Assistant Professor of Practical Theology, Redeemer Seminary

“John Frame has faced classrooms of bright and talented students for decades. He has shared with them a biblically based theology that faithfully addresses difficult questions and problems. This text is the sweet fruit of that classroom labor. Reading it makes those who never had the opportunity to attend see a little of what we missed and those who were his students glad that they were. *Systematic Theology* reads extremely well and always points the reader to the glorious Lord who is the text’s subject. Frame is to be congratulated for a job well done!”

—**Richard C. Gamble**, Professor of Systematic Theology, Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary

“Professor Frame’s *Systematic Theology* is a long-anticipated and richly rewarding treasure. The very best of what we have valued in his decades of faithful labor are represented here in this culminating and crowning achievement. It is neither exhaustive nor thin, and readers will likely wish it accounted more for this or that question or development. But as a survey of theology that seeks to be relentlessly biblical—a most refreshing conviction!—it is a clear and fine example of the judicious, humble, and joyful spirit of theological inquiry of which Professor Frame has long been a superb example. As the author has undoubtedly hoped we would, I submit that we cannot help but come away from a patient reading of this tome with greater confidence in the truth of Holy Scripture, with zeal to submit to the wise and loving lordship of Jesus Christ, and with a longing to make him known.”

—**Mark A. Garcia**, Adjunct Professor of Systematic Theology, Westminster Theological Seminary; Adjunct Professor of Church History, Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary; Pastor, Immanuel Presbyterian Church, Pittsburgh

“Not content merely to give us Berkhof in a different wrapper, John Frame has produced a new *Systematic Theology* that maintains continuity with the best of the Reformed tradition while breaking important new ground. Employing the same multiperspectival approach worked out in his *Theology of Lordship* series, Dr. Frame addresses the various loci of theology in a fresh way. He grounds his theological work in exegesis and engages widely with theologians across the theological spectrum—and across the centuries. He faithfully teaches as a Reformed theologian, always remembering that the confessional standards of the church are subordinate to Scripture. His approach is balanced and his irenic spirit commendable, though certain to displease some of a more dogmatic stripe. I believe, however, that in our fragmented and needlessly argumentative Reformed circles, we need this theology—‘for such a time as this.’ Years ago in a personal conversation, Dr. Frame described his approach as being ‘Reformed but not angry about it.’ His *Systematic Theology* is ‘Reformed but not angry about it,’ and the church will be greatly blessed by this contribution from our foremost theologian.”

—**R. J. Gore Jr.**, Professor of Systematic Theology, Erskine Theological Seminary

“Though it is more compact on each subject, *Systematic Theology* is not an abridgment of John Frame’s earlier books. His already-clear thoughts have continued to develop and crystallize. The section on covenant history that precedes the material on the doctrine of God is especially helpful. I look forward to teaching theology with this book.”

—**Howard Griffith**, Associate Professor of Systematic Theology and Academic Dean, Reformed Theological Seminary, Washington, D.C.

“This is a remarkable volume—a wonderfully clear, refreshingly insightful, profoundly biblical treatment of systematic theology. While reading this book, I felt as though I once again had the privilege of being a student in John Frame’s theology classes, the classes that so deeply influenced my thinking as a Westminster Seminary student forty years ago. But now the material has been enriched by a lifetime of further research and teaching. An outstanding achievement!”

—**Wayne Grudem**, Research Professor of Theology and Biblical Studies, Phoenix Seminary, Phoenix, Arizona

“Vintage Frame—the old, old story, but with new slants and new emphases to make the reader sit up and think. John ‘Rabbi’ Duncan remarked of Jonathan Edwards that his doctrine is all application, and his application doctrine. Frame aspires to be of Edwards’s school, but he’s also a teacher who sets homework for his readers. Also like Edwards, sometimes his words are spiced with a polemical hot sauce. A systematic theology to ponder and to profit from.”

—**Paul Helm**, Teaching Fellow, Philosophical Theology, John Calvin, Regent College

“When Charles Hodge emerged as Presbyterianism’s premier theologian in the nineteenth century, students and pastors alike awaited the completion of his three-volume

Systematic Theology. When the final volume appeared, all found what they had hoped for—a magisterial work. It was not merely a rehash of Hodge’s classroom lectures but a careful reworking of material that he had successfully taught at Princeton for many decades. The fact that Hodge’s volumes are still reprinted today testifies to their staying power. With the appearance of John Frame’s *Systematic Theology*, one now finds a work that will likewise serve Reformed Christians for a similar length of time. Frame is well known for his perspectival theological method, his clarity and comprehensiveness in exposition of the many-sidedness of the biblical text, his apt illustrations that capture profound theological and biblical truth, and his ability to pose stimulating questions that enable students to probe even beyond his reflections. Perhaps the highest praise that can be given to theologians, besides the affirmation that their theology leads to doxology, is that their treatment sustains and further stimulates their readers’ interest. I have never opened the pages of John’s many works to ascertain his treatment of a given theological point or biblical text without being enlightened. More than that, however, after finding what I originally sought, I realized that I was still reading an hour later. Students of Reformed theology will find themselves similarly enthralled.”

—**W. Andrew Hofferker**, Emeritus Professor of Church History, Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson

“If you want a philosophy and theology drenched in the Bible with literally thousands of biblical references, this book is for you—and for me! Dr. Frame deals with so many topics with the skills of both a generalist and a specialist that reading him on virtually any subject is greatly beneficial. May this magnum opus of biblical theology be widely read in the church for years to come.”

—**Peter R. Jones**, Scholar in Residence, Adjunct Professor of Practical Theology, Westminster Seminary California

“Reading John Frame’s *Systematic Theology* often encourages, occasionally puzzles, but almost always stimulates. Growing out of a lifetime of reflection and wrestling with biblical texts, these pages contain much that we can learn from as we all try to understand better how God glorifies his lordship in our salvation. I, for one, am thankful that we now have this one-volume synthesis of Frame’s thinking.”

—**Kelly M. Kopic**, Professor of Theological Studies, Covenant College

“This *Systematic Theology* is by any measure a crowning achievement in a fruitful theological career of teaching, preaching, and writing by Professor John Frame. It is the outpouring of many jars of fragrant and well-aged ‘wine on the lees’: the rich vintage that has been matured in a bright Christian mind that has been immersed in meditation on (and obedience to) the Word of God in the fellowship of the Reformed church for more than threescore years and ten.

“Like Frame’s other works that I have read, this book is written with enthusiastic faith in God and in the Scriptures that the Holy Spirit inspired, and in fellowship with

the risen Christ. It is written clearly; Frame is never ashamed of his position (traditional Calvinism), and is humble enough to say about some difficulties, 'I do not know.' His writing exhibits humility and unwavering submission before both the clear truths and the mysteries of God. He is always charitable toward those whose position he thinks is wrong and presents it fairly, and yet he does take a stand, which he knows will not suit everyone. You might not agree with all that he says, but at least you will grasp precisely what he is saying.

"Someone described C. S. Lewis as 'A Mind Awake,' and that is how I see John Frame. This volume shows how alert he is to moral, philosophical, and societal issues raised by Christian truth claims over the last three centuries in a secular culture.

"One of the great contributions of Frame's theology is that it shows the inescapable necessity of starting with—and remaining with—the presupposition of the truth of Holy Scripture, for theology and for everything else that we wish to make sense of. Along this line, not only in this book but in others that he has written, I have found very helpful his explanation of why a certain circularity of reasoning is always necessary when arguing for any ultimate authority (e.g., whether Holy Scripture, human reason, empiricism, or, perhaps, evolutionism). Rationalists have long accused Christians of circular reasoning (as concerns the Bible), but what they do not tell you is that they, too, must use the assumption of a final authority themselves, in order to prove their point.

"Frame's section on the providence of God is one of the most beautiful that I have ever read. At times I was less than comfortable with his account of the rather direct relationship of God to evil, yet I am not sure that I could treat the subject any better, if as well. But I must keep thinking about it. His discussion of how God brings about free decisions of humans—which both avoids short-circuiting our responsibility and avoids the false theory of libertarian free will (i.e., that our will is free from the control of our fallen personality, and is ultimately free from the control of the Sovereign God)—is one of the best I have seen.

"In sum, Frame's *Systematic Theology* cogently and succinctly presents the most crucial thought and practice of the long Christian tradition (especially in its Reformed branch, which has been concerned above all to be faithful to the entirety of Holy Scripture), in terms that can be understood in this twenty-first century, where we are called to live. Frame's English is lucid; his learning is great, but he does not overwhelm you with it. His doctrine is in accordance with the Westminster tradition of the seventeenth century (and behind that, Calvin of the sixteenth century, and Augustine of the fifth), always looking at these Augustinian traditions in light of God's written Word (and under it), and he helps the reader to deal with the problems of speaking and living out that tradition in an aggressively secular age. This volume is eminently suitable for a seminary or college textbook. It will also give inspiration to many a preacher (as it has to this one!). I perceive that it was written in an atmosphere of quiet joy, and I will be surprised if it does not convey something of that joy to those who read it."

—**Douglas F. Kelly**, Richard Jordan Professor of Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte

“This book by John Frame on systematic theology provides students of God’s Word with a tool designed to clearly understand and effectively explain the Scriptures. It is indeed a sterling treasure that is sure to stand the test of time.”

—**Simon J. Kistemaker**, Professor of New Testament, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando

“Those who have appreciated Frame’s contributions to theology in previous works, such as his *Doctrine of God*, will not be disappointed with his *Systematic Theology*. Adopting a strongly biblical perspective, Frame succeeds in presenting a comprehensive treatment of the various theological loci that also is highly accessible. This book will be of value for the specialist, student, and general reader alike. It marks a major milestone in Frame’s distinguished career.”

—**Robert Letham**, Senior Tutor, Systematic and Historical Theology, Wales Evangelical School of Theology

“John Frame sets out to be biblical, clear, and cogent, and succeeds splendidly. Steeped in the tradition of Geerhardus Vos and John Murray, he offers a work that is firmly rooted in exegesis, comprehensive in scope, and rigorous in methodology, yet easily accessible to all serious lovers of Scripture.”

—**Donald Macleod**, Professor of Systematic Theology (Retired), Free Church College, Edinburgh

“As someone who taught systematic theology and Christian doctrine in seminary for nine years, I find John Frame’s *Systematic Theology* a significant contribution to historic, orthodox, biblical theological thinking. I especially appreciate Frame’s conversational style of writing—as if he were talking on a personal level with his reader. If theology is the making of distinctions, Frame does an exceptional job of bringing fresh and illuminating meaning to traditional theological terms; for example, in chapter 3, ‘God’s Lordship as a Unique Worldview,’ he says of God’s immanence that it is ‘*the deepest sense in which God is present in Jesus.*’ A telling description, that. I also think Frame’s pedagogical focus on the question ‘Why does this matter?’ is pointedly necessary in today’s evangelical climate, and illustrates his view that ‘meaning is application.’ He is definitely a ‘so what’ theologian, yet skillfully combines both the fully worked-out objective content and the subjective dimension needed in a proper theological education. Frame’s *Systematic Theology* is admirably accessible without compromising the depth and complexity of biblical theological thought.

“One of the most important elements of Frame’s *Systematic Theology* is what I can best describe as its devotional dimension. Even in the discussion of complex metaphysical attributes of God, Frame presents God as an intimately personal being and not simply a philosophical abstraction. His discussion of God’s lordship has deepened my own spiritual experience. (Indeed, I found myself reading chapters of *Systematic Theology* as parts of my daily devotions.)

“Were I still teaching systematic theology, Frame’s thorough, illuminating, comprehensive, and spiritually powerful treatment of the classical topics of systematic theology would definitely be my primary course text.”

—**Reginald F. McLelland**, Professor of Philosophy Emeritus, Covenant College

“John M. Frame, occupant of the J. D. Trimble Chair of Systematic Theology and Philosophy at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, is a household name not only in Reformed circles but across a broad swath of ecclesiastical and denominational traditions. His published works in the fields of his expertise are widely respected for their adherence to biblical fidelity and the tightness of their argumentation. This major work on systematic theology maintains Frame’s reputation for impeccable scholarship on the one hand and eminent practicality on the other. It is a theology that not only educates but works in everyday life.”

—**Eugene H. Merrill**, Distinguished Professor of Old Testament Studies, Dallas Theological Seminary

“‘Count your blessings, name them one by one,’ and I count the writings of John Frame to be *one* of my greatest blessings. He’s a guide for many of us in the twenty-first century, especially in this volume—*Systematic Theology*. His treatment of all the standard theological topics is the gold standard. And as a theologically informed philosopher, I was especially interested in Frame’s discussion of epistemology. Amen and Amen!”

—**David K. Naugle**, Distinguished University Professor, Dallas Baptist University

“Readers of this comprehensive work will rejoice to see a biblically saturated exposition of the great truths of the Christian faith. John Frame has now given his unique and fascinating insights to the church in one volume. This work will be invaluable for anyone who wants to see the biblical roots of Christian doctrine, and is a clear testimony against any who think that systematic theology can arise from any source other than Scripture.”

—**K. Scott Oliphint**, Professor of Apologetics and Systematic Theology, Westminster Theological Seminary

“*Systematic Theology* brings together, slims down, sums up, and augments all the wisdom contained in Frame’s four-volume Lordship series. It is a worthy climax to the life’s work of one who has only ever sought to be a faithful servant of Christ, teaching in his church. It is a privilege to celebrate its appearing and to commend it for serious study. I guarantee that the dividends of such study will be uniformly high. Thank you, John Frame, for this superb gift.”

—**J. I. Packer**, Board of Governors’ Professor of Theology, Regent College, Vancouver, British Columbia

“I highly recommend this book as a solid, profound, and readable summary of theology, and at the same time a suitable introduction to John Frame’s more specialized

writings. It is valuable also for those who are already familiar with Frame's works. He sometimes approaches old subjects in new ways, and he includes thoughts and arguments that have not appeared elsewhere or that have appeared in print but have up till now not been integrated into his major works. The result is brilliant, practical, and edifying."

—**Vern S. Poythress**, Professor of New Testament Interpretation, Editor of the *Westminster Theological Journal*, Westminster Theological Seminary

"Many years ago, John Frame signaled his desire to show in some measure the richness of the theological resources available to Reformed orthodoxy and thereby to make that position more attractive. Today, Frame's many volumes are themselves vital resources that simultaneously fortify and adorn the Reformed theological tradition that he has expounded over many decades. In this his newest volume—Bible-centered, multiperspectival systematic theology, nurtured in the soil of Warfield, Bavinck, Murray, and Van Til—Frame demonstrates once again why he has become a teacher to this generation of Reformed pastors and theologians. Students familiar with Frame's work know what to expect and will enjoy his application of multiperspectivalism to several new loci. Those new to Frame will find his system accessible, his reflections on doctrine judicious, and his modeling of theology as essentially a study of Scripture a refreshing tonic that can be shared with all of God's people. Thank you, Professor Frame!"

—**Mark P. Ryan**, Adjunct Professor of Religion and Cultures, Covenant Theological Seminary; Director, Francis A. Schaeffer Institute

"When it comes to the field of systematic theology, anything that John M. Frame writes is certainly worth reading. This is so because Frame understands the difference between the primary standard and secondary standards. The primary source and standard for systematic theology is the written Word of God in Holy Scripture, and the secondary standards are the creeds and confessions formulated by the church across the centuries. Frame does not manipulate the text of Scripture to make it supportive of received doctrinal formulations, but subscribes to the Reformed creeds and confessions because they embody the truth that the Lord has given us in his Word. The creeds and confessions do not stand on a level with the only infallible rule of faith and practice, but are planted deep under Scripture and are subject to revision as the Holy Spirit leads the church of Christ on its way to ultimate victory when the knowledge of the Lord will fill the earth as the waters cover the sea.

"In this systematic theology, Frame has not overwhelmed us with the scholarly apparatus characteristic of so much theological literature, and as he certainly is capable of doing. Instead, he has chosen to enter into conversation with his reader, showing how he has come to understand the teaching of God's Word. He takes us with himself into a deeper and fuller exploration of God's creative and redemptive purpose in the

world. Frame's work will well serve the needs and interests of the informed layman and theological student as well as the more advanced scholar."

—**Norman Shepherd**, Former Pastor; Former Professor of Systematic Theology, Holland

"For those already introduced to Frame, here is the same sober emphasis on a scripturally rooted theology combined with rigorous thinking that you can recall from live lectures or addresses. For those unfamiliar with Frame, here is a wonderful entry to his engaging and nuanced thought, which breathes a commendable evangelical catholicity."

—**Kenneth J. Stewart**, Professor of Theological Studies, Covenant College

"In his *Systematic Theology*, once again John Frame has wonderfully served the church and glorified God through his writing. Frame writes with unusual clarity, humility, and joy, which fosters a deeper love for Christ. His theological method is profoundly biblical, so the reader learns how to do evangelical theology, along with learning evangelical doctrine. Among Frame's other stellar works, his *Systematic Theology* may prove to be his most significant contribution. The beginning chapters on the story line of the Bible and the closing ones on the Christian life set this work apart from others like it. They ensure that the systematic study of doctrine is considered within the overarching story of the Bible and that God's truth informs our lives. I'm deeply grateful that this wise, seasoned, godly saint has given us this treasure trove of distilled biblical truth, and hope it has the wide, edifying influence it should."

—**Erik Thoennes**, Professor of Theology, Chair, Undergraduate Theology, Biola University/Talbot School of Theology; Pastor, Grace Evangelical Free Church, La Mirada

"John Frame's *Systematic Theology* is an important landmark in one-volume treatments of the major loci of doctrine. Frame's signature is readily apparent on every page: commitment to Scripture for everything he writes, accessible philosophical analysis of difficult questions, and, yes, triperspectivalism. This volume ranks as the most recommendable single-volume systematic theology of our time."

—**Derek W. H. Thomas**, John E. Richards Professor of Systematic and Practical Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson; Minister of Teaching, First Presbyterian Church, Jackson

"What a gift the gracious Lord of all has given us in the person and work of John Frame. Of the many qualities that commend John Frame's *Systematic Theology*, three stand out: (1) It is eminently biblical. As Frame indicates at the outset, his main concern (rightly) is to reflect, as best he can, the wisdom and wonder of the Word of God, which shows forth the glory of God in all he is and does. (2) It is

richly orthodox. John Frame knows the gospel and what doctrines and positions are necessary to sustain, support, and spread that gospel. He holds the line at every point where this is needed, in a day when many have yielded slack to, or have thrown down, that doctrinal lifeline. (3) It is deeply insightful. Frame demonstrates where theological innovation is best applied—in endeavoring to rethink and restate age-old truths with an eye both to biblical fidelity and to contemporary expression. May God be pleased to magnify his name through the broad reading and study of this great work.”

—**Bruce A. Ware**, Professor of Christian Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

**AN INTRODUCTION TO
CHRISTIAN BELIEF**

JOHN M. FRAME



P U B L I S H I N G
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

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To the Next Generation

Adam
Amanda
Gavin
Kristina
Malena
Olivia
Rebecca
And those yet unborn

And to Carol
NKwagala nnyo!

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- (6) 2 Thessalonians 1:12; Titus 2:13; 2 Peter 1:1
- (7) 1 Timothy 3:15–16
- (8) Hebrews 1:8
- (9) 1 John 5:20
- (10) Philippians 2:6
- (11) Colossians 2:9
- (12) Epilogue

F. Other Titles of Christ

G. Other Evidence for Jesus' Deity

H. The Deity of the Holy Spirit

22. Father, Son, and Spirit

A. The Distinctness of the Persons

B. The Distinct Personality of the Spirit

C. *Circumincessio*

D. Mutual Glorification

- E. Substance and Persons
- F. Ontological and Economic
- G. Eternal Generation
- H. Eternal Procession
- I. *Filioque*
- J. Subordination
- K. Trinitarian Models
- L. Trinitarian Analogies
- M. Philosophical Analogies
- N. Trinity and the Lordship of God

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- B. God's Truth
- C. God's Word to Us
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 - (2) Meaningful Authority
 - (3) Personal Presence

24. God Speaks to Us in Events and Words

- A. Revelation through Events
 - (1) Nature and General History
 - (2) Redemptive History
- B. Revelation through Words: The Divine Voice
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- B. God's Written Words in the Old Testament
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- D. The Canon of Scripture

26. The Nature of Scripture

A. Inspiration

B. Inerrancy, Infallibility

(1) Definitions

(2) Biblical Basis

(3) Inerrancy and Precision

(4) “Qualifications” of Inerrancy

C. Phenomena and Purpose

D. Clarity

(1) Clarity and God’s Control

(2) Clarity and God’s Authority

(3) Clarity and God’s Presence

E. Necessity

F. Comprehensiveness

G. Sufficiency

(1) Confessional Formulation

(2) Biblical Basis

(3) General and Particular Sufficiency

(4) Challenges to the Sufficiency of Scripture

27. From God’s Lips to Our Ears

A. Copying and Textual Criticism

(1) What Is an Autograph?

(2) Is This Limitation Scriptural?

(3) But Don’t Biblical Writers Quote Copies as God’s Word?

(4) Is This Limitation an Apologetic Dodge?

(5) Does This Limitation Make Inerrancy a Dead Letter?

(6) Why Did God Allow the Autographs to Be Lost?

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- (2) Christ, the Mediator of All Revelation
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- (4) Epistemology and the Spirit's Witness
- (5) The Spirit and the Sufficiency of Scripture
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 - B. Our Knowledge of God
 - C. God's Knowability and Incomprehensibility
 - D. Knowing God in Faith and in Unbelief
 - (1) Knowledge in Obedience
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- 31. Justifying Claims to Knowledge
 - A. Normative Justification
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 - C. Existential Justification
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 - (2) Seeing Things in Biblical Patterns
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- D. Perception, Experience
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 - B. Angels and Men
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 - C. Male and Female
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 - (2) Men and Women Are Equally in the Image of God
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- C. Responsibility and Ability
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- G. Creaturely Otherness, Integrity, and Significance
- H. Divine and Human Creativity
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FOREWORD

REFORMED THEOLOGY PRESENTS itself (as Roman Catholic theology also does) as a comprehensive, thoroughgoing embodiment of universal Christian truth. The taproot for all versions of it has been John Calvin's catechetical treatise for preachers and adult believers, the fifth and final edition of his *Institutes*, where the wealth of truth uncovered by Martin Luther's biblical minings is consolidated for all time. Since then, three parts of the world have made major contributions to the Reformed heritage, each engendering its own conflicts and loyalties. England saw the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Puritan development, from William Perkins to John Owen, exploring life in Christ in and through the Holy Spirit; nineteenth-century Holland produced the Kuyperian theology of human and Christian culture within a Reformed frame; and the twentieth century witnessed, within the conservative Presbyterian world, the ongoing quest for Reformed methodological authenticity, in which B. B. Warfield, Geerhardus Vos, J. Gresham Machen, and Cornelius Van Til are, by common consent, the leading names. I'd like to think that tomorrow's Reformed leaders will add John Frame's name to that list; I believe they should.

The church must ever seek in its theological life to verbalize biblically affirmed realities and biblically approved attitudes—to make clear to itself what is and will be involved in holding fast to these things and living in their light and power, and to detect and reject inauthentic alternatives. That, of course, involves interacting both with the words and ways of the surrounding world and with the heritage of the Christian past. In the nature of the case, theology is a cumulative enterprise in which each generation of thinkers stands on the shoulders of those who went before, and reflects on its intellectual legacy in the spirit of a grateful, though critical, trustee. This requires discernment and may call for challenges to what is customary, for the church's heritage contains, along with truth and wisdom, limitations and mistakes and anachronisms, so that it can not only inspire but also mislead our minds and put damaging blinders on them. That is why wise men say that the Reformed church must always be reforming (*ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*; actually, the Latin is passive: "needs always to be reformed" is the precise translation). To the church's head, our living Lord Jesus Christ, the church's well-being is a matter of abiding concern, so those who theologize in his name should always see active service in and to the church as part of their vocation.

Concern for a clear theological method and concern for the church's well-being are evident as two driving forces in John Frame's theological work, all of which anchors itself within the territory mapped out by the Westminster Standards. In the world of separatist American Presbyterianism, he has sometimes come under fire as a left-wing reformist; in the wider world of mainstream conservative Protestantism, which has the Reformed heritage at its center, he is not as well known as he should be; but where his work is noticed, he is recognized as one of the most clearheaded and best disciplined biblical systematists of our time. His status here will become apparent to anyone who takes time to study this, his magnum opus, and it is a matter for thanksgiving that he has been able to crown his career as teacher and writer by composing it. He seems to have feared lest it be unwittingly uneven, because he had not taught in the seminary classroom all the topics he covers here—but he need not have worried. At every point his probing, lucid, patient, thoroughly resourced reflections display mastery, and the easy friendliness of his style becomes the spoonful of sugar that makes the mixture go down into mind and heart in the pleasantest way possible, every time.

Clearly, the ideal reader whom Frame has in mind is the seminary or Bible college student who will one day be teaching in the church, and his aim throughout is to render that person a humble, faithful, Bible-soaked, Christ-loving, reverent communicator of the revealed truth of God. The thoroughness with which he searches the Scriptures, the firmness of his insistence that on all matters canonical Scripture must be allowed to speak the last word, and his quickness to discern where this is not being done, or not done well enough, give his discussions hermeneutical significance that his academic peers will appreciate. Also, his presentations reveal something yet more precious in a teacher of theology, namely, an awareness that it is natural for the children of God to want to know all they can learn about their heavenly Father. Over and above his primary audience, Frame writes for all who have this instinct and are willing to think about divine things at some length.

The goal of theology, as Frame understands it (and there is nothing out of the ordinary here), is the organized knowledge of God and ourselves together, in the context of our past, present, and future lives. This knowledge, which is both cognitive and relational, must be drawn, first to last, as we have already observed, from the written Word of God—the Bible. Frame sees, and stresses, that since God is infinite and we are finite, our knowledge of him and of our relationship to him cannot be other than, and so at best will be, perspectival, that is, made up of a set of distinct but correlated perspectives, each providing a thematic focus complementary to what other perspectives yield. Anyone who has driven, or can imagine driving, the sixty miles or so around the foot of Washington State's mighty Mount Rainier, stopping every few miles to view the mountain from a new angle, will appreciate what this means. Within this carefully constructed commitment to perspectivalism as the scaffolding, Frame opts for a regular procedure of what may be called heuristic triadic analysis, which opens up each point of theological substance by subdividing it into three. The procedure seems to grow out of the demonstrable advance in understanding that Frame first achieved

by his archetypal analysis of God's lordship (that is, his sovereignty) in terms of control, authority, and presence. While not categorically claiming a connection between triperspectivalism and the truth of the Trinity, Frame habitually practices it as an unflinching didactic technique (in his own words, "a good pedagogical device, a set of hooks on which to hang the doctrines of the faith"). He is a master at it, and presents us with no fewer than 110 cogent triadic analyses in the course of this work, all neatly listed at the back as Appendix A. The proof of the pudding, they say, is in the eating, and there is no doubt that Frame's triads, all achieved by separating out situational/normative/existential factors in the reality, or phenomenon, under analysis, do again and again bring into his discourse a degree of clarity that is quite stunning. Familiar, faded doctrines become fresh; fuzzy doctrines become precise; dull doctrines become stimulating and exciting. History will perhaps see this technique as John Frame's major contribution to the conceptual toolkit with which systematic theology works.

Briefly, now: *Systematic Theology* brings together, slims down, sums up, and augments all the wisdom contained in Frame's four-volume Lordship series. It is a worthy climax to the life's work of one who has only ever sought to be a faithful servant of Christ, teaching in his church. It is a privilege to celebrate its appearing and to commend it for serious study. I guarantee that the dividends of such study will be uniformly high. Thank you, John Frame, for this superb gift.

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PREFACE

SOME VERY GREAT systematic theologians never wrote systematic theologies, among them B. B. Warfield. Warfield never desired to write one. He thought the *Systematic Theology* of his predecessor Charles Hodge was quite adequate, and for himself he preferred to write scholarly and popular works on specific doctrinal subjects. His stature as a theologian is no less for this decision. Nevertheless, I would not be surprised to hear that most teachers in the field would dearly love to have the opportunity to summarize their thoughts in a full-scale systematics. I belong to the latter group, so I am immensely thankful to God for the opportunity to write this book, an elaborate exposition of the teaching of Scripture as I understand it.

When my friend and editor John J. Hughes suggested this project, I did not resist, but he sought to motivate me nonetheless. He pointed out that in my case the task might be easier than for others, because I have already written big systematic theology books in some areas,¹ and I have written an introductory summary of theology, including topics not covered in the larger books.² Certainly these earlier books have been a great help to me in writing this one, and readers of those books will see here a basic continuity of thought and approach. They might even suspect (rightly) that in many places some text has been cut and pasted from those past books. But I have tried to do more than to summarize the big books and to expand chapters of the smaller one. Rather, I have tried to rethink everything to make it more biblical, clear, and cogent.

For me, *biblical* is always the operative word. Systematic theologies, to be sure, are often full of historical lore about the theological battles of the past and present, and that is needed up to a point. Readers will misunderstand the doctrine of the Trinity, for example, if they don't see how the technical terms *substance* and *person* emerged from controversy over Sabellianism and Arianism. And I want also to include enough historical discussion to express proper gratefulness to those teachers whom God has raised up in past generations. Neither my theology nor anyone else's gets its content exclusively from an individual encounter with the Bible. And I don't want my readers to think I am claiming anything like that for my own work.

Yet the Bible is the most important thing. Only the Bible is the written Word of God made available to us. It must have the final word in all historical and contemporary

1. DKG; DG; DCL; DWG.

2. SBL.

controversies. So the most important aspect of theological work is to present to readers what the Bible says. And if some choice is to be made (as it must) of what to include and exclude, that choice must be on the basis of what is best suited to express the Bible's teaching to contemporary readers.

My use of this criterion has led to a systematic theology that is somewhat less historical in focus than other volumes. I have also written less than they about controversies among contemporary academic theologians, because frankly I do not think many of these controversies are helpful in bringing the Bible's teaching to Christian believers. I will have more to say on these subjects in chapter 1 of this book.

I am thankful to all who have helped to make this work possible. First among these is my dear wife, Mary, and our children, Debbie, Doreen, Skip, Justin, and Johnny. Thanks also go to the administration, faculty, and student body of Reformed Theological Seminary, who have given me constant and gracious support. P&R Publishing, which has given me many opportunities over the years to expound biblical doctrine, has now allowed me the privilege of publishing this volume. I am especially thankful to John J. Hughes, my longtime friend, who shepherded this volume through the publishing process and who has helped me much on my past writing projects. In this book he has worked together with Karen Magnuson, an outstanding copyeditor who has also done excellent work on my past projects. Thanks also to my RTS colleague John Muether, who has produced the Index of Scripture and the Index of Subjects and Names.

I have prayed that this book will also show that the hand of God, in the Spirit of Jesus, has been in it. Apart from him I can do nothing. For his work in and through me I am uniquely grateful.

ABBREVIATIONS

AGG	John M. Frame, <i>Apologetics to the Glory of God</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1994)
ASV	American Standard Version
BRD	Herman Bavinck, <i>Reformed Dogmatics</i> , 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003–8)
CD	Karl Barth, <i>Church Dogmatics</i> , 4 vols. (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1936–62)
CTJ	<i>Calvin Theological Journal</i>
CVT	John M. Frame, <i>Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1995)
CWM	John M. Frame, <i>Contemporary Worship Music: A Biblical Defense</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1997)
DCL	John M. Frame, <i>The Doctrine of the Christian Life</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008)
DG	John M. Frame, <i>The Doctrine of God</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002)
DKG	John M. Frame, <i>The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1987)
DWG	John M. Frame, <i>The Doctrine of the Word of God</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010)
ER	John M. Frame, <i>Evangelical Reunion: Denominations and the One Body of Christ</i> (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991); available at http://www.frame-poythress.org ; http://www.evangelicalreunion.org
ESV	English Standard Version
GST	Wayne Grudem, <i>Systematic Theology</i> (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994)
HC	Heidelberg Catechism
<i>Institutes</i>	John Calvin, <i>Institutes of the Christian Religion</i>

IRF	John M. Frame, “Introduction to the Reformed Faith,” available at http://www.frame-poythress.org
JETS	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
KJV	King James Version
LXX	The Septuagint, early Greek translation of the OT, sometimes quoted in the NT
MCW	<i>Collected Writings of John Murray</i> , 4 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977)
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NEB	New English Bible
NIV	New International Version
NKJV	New King James Version
NOG	John M. Frame, <i>No Other God</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001)
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
PP	John M. Frame, “A Primer on Perspectivalism,” available at http://www.frame-poythress.org
PWG	John M. Frame, <i>Perspectives on the Word of God</i> (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000)
RD	Heinrich Heppe, <i>Reformed Dogmatics</i> (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1950, 1978)
RSV	Revised Standard Version
SBL	John M. Frame, <i>Salvation Belongs to the Lord: An Introduction to Systematic Theology</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006)
SCG	Thomas Aquinas, <i>Summa contra Gentiles</i>
ST	Thomas Aquinas, <i>Summa Theologiae</i>
WCF	Westminster Confession of Faith (Atlanta: Committee for Christian Education and Publications, Presbyterian Church in America, 1986); published together with the Westminster Larger Catechism (WLC), the Westminster Shorter Catechism (WSC), and proof texts
WST	John M. Frame, <i>Worship in Spirit and Truth</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1996)
WTJ	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>

PART 1

INTRODUCTION TO SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

WHAT IS THEOLOGY?

THEOLOGY IS FULL of definitions of things. One of the useful features of a systematic theology is that you can turn there and get quick definitions of terms such as *justification*, *glorification*, or *hypostatic union*. Definitions are useful, but we should be warned that they are rarely, if ever, found in Scripture itself.¹ Such definitions are themselves theology in that they are the work of human beings trying to understand Scripture. This work is fallible, and theological definitions are almost never adequate in themselves to describe the complex ways in which language is used in the Bible. For example, when John speaks of those who “believed” in Jesus in John 8:31, he is not using the term in any of the classical theological definitions of *belief* or *faith*. You can tell, because in verse 44 Jesus tells them, “You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires.”

This reminder is especially appropriate when we are defining terms that are not explicitly found in Scripture itself. *Theology* itself is one of these. Theologians have developed a number of terms and concepts that are absent from Scripture itself, such as *Trinity*, *substance*, *person*, *nature*, *aseity*, *inerrancy*, *effectual calling*. There is nothing wrong with inventing new terms in order to better communicate biblical teaching. Indeed, this happens on a grand scale whenever the Bible is translated into a new language. When people first translated the Bible into French, German, English, and other languages, each time they had to come up with a whole set of new terms for everything in the Bible. From this fact, we can see that the line between translation and theology is not sharp.

Theologians came up with the term *effectual calling* to distinguish one biblical use of the term *calling* from others. Effectual calling is God’s sovereign summons that actually draws a person into union with Christ. But this is not the only kind of calling mentioned in Scripture. *Calling* can also refer to a name-giving, or an invitation, or a request for someone’s attention. So the term *effectual calling* isolates a particular

1. A few Bible passages come close to defining something, such as 1 John 3:4 (sin); 1 John 4:10 (God’s love). But are these definitions, or only contextually significant descriptions? Of course, the precise distinction between definition and description is not always clear.

biblical concept, distinguishing it from others. We see again, then, how making a definition is itself a theological task. It can help us to understand something of the teaching of Scripture.

Definitions, then, can be helpful teaching tools. But we should not look at them to find what something “really is,” as though a definition gave us unique insight into the nature of something beyond what we could find in the Bible itself. A theological definition of *omniscience* doesn’t tell you what omniscience really is, as if the biblical descriptions of God’s knowledge were somehow inadequate, even misleading or untrue. Even though there are none to few definitions in the Bible, Scripture, not any theological definition, is our ultimate authority. Theological definitions must measure up to Scripture, not the other way around.

Nor should we assume that there is only one possible definition of something. *Sin* can be defined as (1) transgression of God’s law or as (2) rebellion against God’s lordship. Other definitions, too, may be possible, but let’s just consider these. Of course, if you define sin as transgression of God’s law, you may well need to make it clear that such transgression constitutes rebellion. And if you define it as rebellion, eventually you will probably need to say that the rebellion in question is a rejection of a divine law. You may use either definition as long as you understand that each implies the other. You may choose either one as your definition, as long as you recognize the other as a description.

So of course, definitions are not something to live or die for. We should seek to understand the definitions of various writers, recognizing that someone who uses a different definition from ours might not differ with us at all on the substantive doctrine.

Long and Short Definitions

Theologians often prefer very long definitions. One of Karl Barth’s definitions of *theology* is an example:

Theology is science seeking the knowledge of the Word of God spoken in God’s work—science learning in the school of the Holy Scripture, which witnesses to the Word of God; science labouring in the quest for truth, which is inescapably required of the community that is called by the Word of God.²

Here Barth tries to bring a large amount of theological content into his definition. This attempt is understandable, since every theologian wants his concept of theology to be governed by the content of theology. So he tries to show how the very definition of theology reflects the nature of the gospel, the content of Scripture, the preeminence of Christ, the nature of redemption, and so on.

2. Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 49–50. He uses a somewhat shorter definition in *CD* for the related concept *dogmatics*: “As a theological discipline dogmatics is the scientific self-examination of the Christian Church with respect to the content of its distinctive talk about God.” *CD*, 1.1:4.

I think this is a mistake. In his *Semantics of Biblical Language*,³ James Barr warned biblical scholars of the fallacy of supposing that the meanings of biblical terms were loaded with theological content. The meaning of Scripture comes not from its individual terms, but from its sentences, paragraphs, books, and larger units. For example, the word *created*, just by itself, out of all context, teaches us nothing. But “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1) teaches us a great deal. “By him all things were created” (Col. 1:16) teaches us even more.

The same warning is appropriate for theologians. Certainly our theological methods and conclusions must be derived from God’s revelation. But our definition of the word *theology* need not recapitulate those conclusions, though it must certainly be consistent with its conclusions. That is, the definition of *theology* cannot be a condensation of all the content of the Scriptures. Yet it must describe an activity that the Scriptures warrant.

Theology as Application

Let us then attempt to develop a concept or definition of theology.⁴ The basic idea of theology is evident in the etymology of the term: a study of God. But we should seek a more precise definition.

As I will argue in chapters 23–28, in Christianity the study of God is a study of God’s revelation of himself. Natural revelation and word revelation illumine one another. Scripture (our currently available form of word revelation) is crucial to the task of theology because as a source of divine words it is sufficient for human life (2 Tim. 3:16–17), and it has a kind of clarity not found in natural revelation. But natural revelation is a necessary means of interpreting Scripture. To properly understand Scripture, we need to know something about ancient languages and culture, and that information is not always available in Scripture alone. Nevertheless, once we have reached a settled interpretation as to what Scripture says, that knowledge takes precedence over any ideas supposedly derived from natural revelation.

So theology must be essentially a study of Scripture. It should not be defined as an analysis of human religious consciousness or feelings, as in the view of Friedrich Schleiermacher.⁵ But we need to ask *how* theology is to study Scripture. Theology is not interested in finding the middle word in the Hebrew text of Ecclesiastes, for example.

Charles Hodge saw theology as a science that dealt with the facts of Scripture, as an astronomer deals with facts about the heavenly bodies or a geologist deals with facts about rocks. He said that theology “is the exhibition of the facts of Scripture in their proper order and relation, with the principles or general truths involved in the facts themselves, and which pervade and harmonize the whole.”⁶ If Schleiermacher’s concept of theology is *subjectivist*, Hodge’s might be called *objectivist*. Schleiermacher

3. James Barr, *Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 129–40, 246–96.

4. In all the discussion below, it should be evident that the term *theology* refers both to the activity of seeking knowledge and to the texts in which that knowledge is recorded.

5. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (New York: Harper, 1963).

6. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 1:19.

looked inward, Hodge outward. Schleiermacher looked primarily at subjective feelings, Hodge at objective facts. To Hodge, theology seeks the objective truth about God through Scripture. He wants the “facts” and the “truths.”

Certainly Hodge’s definition of theology is better than Schleiermacher’s, because Hodge’s is Bible-centered. But Hodge, like many orthodox evangelical theologians, leaves us confused about an important question: why do we need theology when we have Scripture?

Scripture itself, given Hodge’s own view of Scripture, tells us objective truth about God. We don’t need a theological science to give us that truth. So what is the role of theology?

In the statement quoted above, Hodge says that theology is an “exhibition of the facts of Scripture.” But aren’t the facts of Scripture already exhibited in the biblical text itself?

He further says that theology exhibits these facts “in their proper order and relation.” This sounds a bit as though the order and relation of the facts in Scripture itself are somehow improper, and that theology has to put them back where they belong. People sometimes talk about the theological “system” of biblical doctrine as if that system stated the truth in a better way than Scripture itself, or even as if that system were the real meaning of Scripture hidden beneath all the stories, psalms, wisdom sayings, and so on. I don’t think Hodge had anything like this in mind; such ideas are inconsistent with Hodge’s high view of Scripture. But his phrase “proper order and relation” doesn’t guard well against such notions. And in any case, it leaves unclear the relation between theology and Scripture.

He continues by saying that theology, together with its work of putting the facts of Scripture into proper order and relation, seeks to state “the principles or general truths involved in the facts themselves, and which pervade and harmonize the whole.” Certainly this is one of the things that theologians do, and ought to do. But again we ask: hasn’t Scripture done this already? And if it has, then what is left for theology to do?

In seeking a definition of theology, we need to emphasize not only its continuity with Scripture, but its discontinuity, too. The former is not difficult for orthodox Protestants: theology must be in accord with Scripture. But the latter is more difficult to formulate. Obviously, theology is something different from Scripture. It doesn’t just repeat the words of Scripture. So the main question about theology is this: what is the *difference* between theology and Scripture, and how can that difference be justified?

Evidently the theologian *restates* the facts and general truths of Scripture, for some purpose. But for what purpose? Hodge does not tell us.

In my view, the only possible answer is this: the theologian states the facts and truths of Scripture for the purpose of *edification*. Those truths are stated not for their own sake, but to build up people in Christian faith.

In this way, we align the concept of theology with the concepts of teaching and preaching in the NT. The terms for *teaching*—*didasko*, *didache*, and *didaskalia*⁷—refer not to the stating of objective truth for its own sake, but to the exposition of God’s truth in order to build up God’s people. Consider Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 14:6; 1 Tim. 1:10; 2:7; 4:6, 16; 6:3–4; 2 Tim. 4:2; Titus 1:9; 2 John 9. These passages contain words of the *didasko* group, translated “teacher,” “teaching,” “doctrine.” Notice the frequent emphasis in these passages that teaching has the purpose of building people up in faith and obedience to God. Notice also the phrase *sound doctrine*, in which *sound* is *hygiainos*, “health-giving.” The purpose of teaching is not merely to state the objective truth, but to bring the people to a state of spiritual health.

In defining theology, it is not strictly necessary to align it with a single biblical term, but it is certainly an advantage when we can do this. I propose that we define theology as synonymous with the biblical concept of teaching, with all its emphasis on edification.

So theology is not subjective in Schleiermacher’s sense, but it has a subjective thrust. We need theology in addition to Scripture because God has authorized teaching in the church, and because we need that teaching to mature in the faith. Why did Hodge not state this as the reason we need theology? Perhaps he wanted to encourage respect for academic theological work, so he stressed its objective scientific character. Perhaps he was worried that reference to our subjective edification would encourage the disciples of Schleiermacher. But such considerations are inadequate to justify a definition of theology. Scripture must be decisive even here, and Scripture commends to us a kind of teaching that has people’s needs in mind.

Theology, on this basis, responds to the needs of people. It helps those who have questions about, doubts about, or problems with the Bible. Normally we associate theology with questions of a fairly abstract or academic sort: How can God be one in three? How can Christ be both divine and human? Does regeneration precede faith? But of course, there are other kinds of questions as well. One might be confronted with a Hebrew word, say *dabar*, and ask what it means. Or he might ask the meaning of a Bible verse, say Genesis 1:1. A child might ask whether God can see what we are doing when Mom isn’t watching. I see no reason to doubt that all these sorts of questions are proper subject matter for theology.

Nor would it be wrong to say that theology occurs in the *lives* of people, in their behavior, as well as in their speech. Behavior consists of a series of human decisions, and in those decisions believers seek to follow Scripture. Behavior, too, as well as speech, can be edifying or unedifying. Example is an important form of teaching. Imitating godly people is an important form of Christian learning, and the behavior of these people is often a revelation to us of God’s intentions for us (1 Cor. 11:1). Their application of the Word in their behavior may be called theology. So theology is not merely a means of teaching people how to live; it is life itself.⁸

7. *Didaskalia* is translated “doctrine” in 1 Timothy 1:10; 4:6; Titus 1:9; 2:1. Of course, we today often use *doctrine* as a synonym for *theology*.

8. Another way of bringing out the practicality of theology is to note that the term has often been used (by Abraham Kuyper, for example) to denote the *knowledge* of God that believers receive by saving grace, as in John

There really is no justification for restricting theology only to academic or technical questions. (*How academic? How technical?*) If theology is edifying teaching, theologians need to listen to everybody's questions. My point, however, is not to divert theology from theoretical to practical questions, or to disparage in any way the theoretical work of academic theologians. But I do think that academic and technical theology should not be valued over other kinds. The professor of theology at a university or seminary is no more or less a theologian than the youth minister who seeks to deal with the doubts of college students, or the Sunday school teacher who tells OT stories to children, or the father who leads family devotions, or the person who does not teach in any obvious way but simply tries to obey Scripture. Theoretical and practical questions are equally grist for the theologian's mill.

The only term I know that is broad enough to cover all forms of biblical teaching and all the decisions that people make in their lives is the term *application*. To apply Scripture is to use Scripture to meet a human need, to answer a human question, to make a human decision. Questions about the text of Scripture, translations, interpretation, ethics, Christian growth—all these are fair game for theology. To show (by word or deed) how Scripture resolves all these kinds of questions is to *apply* it. So I offer my definition of theology: theology is *the application of Scripture, by persons, to every area of life.*⁹

Why, then, do we need theology in addition to Scripture? The only answer, I believe, is “because we need to apply Scripture to life.”

Kinds of Theology

Traditionally, theology has been divided into different types. *Exegetical*¹⁰ theology is interpreting the Bible verse by verse. That is application, because it aims to help people understand particular passages in Scripture. *Biblical* theology expounds Scripture as a history of God's dealings with us. It therefore focuses on Scripture as historical narrative. But if it is theology, it cannot be pure narrative. It must be application, dealing with the meaning¹¹ that narrative has for its hearers and readers.

17:3. The early pages of John Calvin's *Institutes* discuss this saving knowledge of God in Christ. On the first page Calvin says that we cannot rightly know ourselves without knowing God, and vice versa. On this concept of theology, see *SBL*, 73–78.

9. Later, I will indicate three perspectives that we can bring to bear on many theological questions. In my definition of theology, those three perspectives are Scripture (normative), persons (existential), areas of life (situational). So my definition of theology contains these three elements.

10. *Exegetical*, *biblical*, and *systematic* theology are all misnomers. Exegetical theology is not more exegetical than the others, nor is biblical theology more biblical, nor is systematic theology necessarily more systematic.

11. *Meaning* is not something different from application. See my discussion in *DKG*, 83–84, 97–98. When someone asks, “What is the meaning of this passage?” he may be asking for a number of things, including (1) a translation into his language, (2) an explanation of its function in its immediate context or in the whole Bible, and (3) help in the personal appropriation of its teaching (what does it mean *to me?*). These forms of meaning are also forms of application, so the two terms cover the same ground. It is therefore misleading for someone to claim that items 1 and 2 represent meaning, but 3 is merely application. All of these are questions about meaning and also about application. All questions about meaning are questions about application, and vice versa.

Systematic theology seeks to apply Scripture by asking what the *whole* Bible teaches about any subject. For example, it examines what David said about the forgiveness of sins, and Jesus, and Paul, and John, and tries to understand what it all adds up to. Another way of putting it is to say that systematic theology seeks to determine what *we today* should believe about forgiveness (or any other scriptural teaching). Seen that way, systematic theology is a highly practical discipline, not abstract and arcane as it is often presented.

Sometimes systematic theologians have produced systems of theology—comprehensive attempts to summarize, analyze, and defend biblical teaching as a whole. When a writer calls his book a systematic theology, a dogmatics, a body of divinity, or a *summa*, we can expect to find in that book such a system. The present volume is that sort of book. But: (1) We should not imagine that any such system is the true meaning of Scripture, lurking, as it were, beneath the text. At best, the system is a summary of Scripture, but Scripture itself (in all its narratives, wisdom deliverances, songs, parables, letters, visions) is our true authority, the true Word of God. (2) This kind of comprehensive system-making is not the only legitimate form of systematic theology. Systematics is equally interested in studies of individual doctrines and answers to individual questions.

Historical theology is the analysis of past theological work. It is truly theology when it does this study in order to better apply biblical teaching to the church of the present day. Without this goal, it is something less than theology, a mere academic discipline among others. I define historical theology as a study of the church's past theology, for the sake of its present and future.

Practical theology is, in my understanding, a department of systematic theology. It asks a particular question of Scripture, among the other questions of systematics. That question is: how should we *communicate* the Word of God? Thus, it deals with preaching, teaching, evangelism, church-planting, missions, media communications, and so on.

Theological Method

In *DKG* I discussed many aspects of theological method. Here I want to make only a single point, that theology should be Bible-centered. That is obvious, given the definition of theology that I have presented. If we are to apply the Bible, we must be in constant conversation with the Bible. If we are to argue adequately for a theological view, we must be able to show the biblical basis of that view.

There are, of course, many auxiliary disciplines that aid the work of theology. God's revelation in creation illumines Scripture, as well as the reverse. So to do theology well, we need to have some knowledge from extrabiblical sources: knowledge of ancient languages and culture, knowledge of how past theologians have dealt with issues. The creeds and confessions of the church are especially important theological sources because they reflect important official agreements on doctrinal issues. It is also useful for a theologian to know the various alternatives available in the theological literature of the present and for us to have some knowledge of secular disciplines, such as

psychology, sociology, politics, economics, philosophy, literary criticism, and the natural sciences. Some of these aid us directly in the interpretation of Scripture. Others help us to understand the contemporary situations to which we intend to apply Scripture.

I think, however, that theology today has become preoccupied with these auxiliary disciplines to the extent of neglecting its primary responsibility: to apply Scripture itself. Theological literature today is focused, especially, on history of doctrine and contemporary thought. Often this literature deals with theological questions by comparing various thinkers from the past and from the present, with a very minimal interaction with Scripture itself.

I cannot help but mention my conviction that this problem is partly the result of our present system for training theologians. To qualify for college or seminary positions, a theologian must earn a Ph.D., ideally from a prestigious liberal university.¹² But at such schools, there is no training in the kind of systematic theology that I describe here. Liberal university theologians do not view Scripture as God's Word, and so they cannot encourage theology as I have defined it, the application of God's infallible Word. For them, one cannot be a respectable scholar unless he thinks autonomously, that is, rejecting the supreme authority of Scripture.

When I studied at Yale in the mid-1960s, *systematic theology* was defined as a historical study of theology since Schleiermacher. (Theology before Schleiermacher was called *history of doctrine*.) In such a school, systematics was a descriptive, not a normative, discipline. It set forth what people have thought about God, not what we *ought* to think about God. Of course, some normative content seeped through: not the normative content of Scripture, but normative content that emerged from the modern mind, from an autonomous rejection of the supreme authority of Scripture.

Students are welcome at such schools to study historical and contemporary theology, and to relate these to auxiliary disciplines such as philosophy and literary criticism. But they are not taught to seek ways of applying Scripture for the edification of God's people. Rather, professors encourage each student to be "up to date" with the current academic discussion and to make "original contributions" to that discussion, out of his autonomous reasoning. So when the theologian finishes his graduate work and moves to a teaching position, even if he is personally evangelical in his convictions, he often writes and teaches as he was encouraged to do in graduate school: academic comparisons and contrasts between this thinker and that, minimal interaction with Scripture itself. In my judgment, this is entirely inadequate for the needs of the church. It is one source of the doctrinal declension of evangelical churches, colleges, and seminaries in our day. Evangelical denominations and schools need to seek new methods of training people to teach theology, educational models that will force theologian candidates to mine Scripture for edifying content. To do this, they may need to cut themselves off, in

12. Full disclosure: I do not have an earned doctorate. I completed all requirements for the Ph.D. at Yale University except for the dissertation. In 2003 I received an honorary D.D. degree from Belhaven College. So critics are welcome to dismiss my comments here as sour grapes if they prefer. I trust that other readers will respond in a less ad hominem fashion.

some degree, from the present-day academic establishment. And to do that, they may have to cut themselves off from the present-day accreditation system, which seeks to make theological seminaries conform more and more to the standards of the secular academic establishment.

It is good for readers of theology to know what Augustine thought about a particular issue, or Martin Luther, John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, Jürgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, or someone else. And it is often interesting to see how a theologian “triangulates” among these, going beyond Barth here, avoiding the extreme of Pannenberg there.

But no theological proposal fully makes its case until it shows itself to be biblical. This means that any theologian worth his salt must interact in depth with the Bible. Such interaction is not only the work of biblical scholars or of exegetical theologians. It is the work of systematic theologians as well. In fact, the systematic theologian, since he aspires to synthesize the teaching of the *whole* Bible, must spend more time with Scripture than anybody else.¹³

The application of Scripture is a very distinctive discipline. Although it depends to some extent on the auxiliary disciplines that I have listed, none of them has the distinct purpose of applying Scripture to the edification of people. To carry out that purpose requires not only academic excellence, but a heart-knowledge of Jesus, a prayerful spirit, and an understanding of the needs of people.

This present volume of systematic theology will be focused on Scripture, not on history of doctrine or contemporary theology. Of course, nobody should suppose that the ideas in this book appeared out of nowhere, with no historical context. My own confession is Reformed, and this book will certainly reflect that orientation, though I hope herein to reach out to members of other doctrinal traditions. And from time to time I will refer to secular and liberal thinkers of the past and present. But my chief interest is to state what the Bible says, that is, what it says to us.

I have no objection to theologians who want to include in their work a larger component of historical and contemporary discussion. As I said before, that is historical theology, and that discipline is often a great help to systematics. I do object to theologies in which the historical emphasis detracts from an adequate biblical focus. I question whether it is possible to do an excellent job of combining a systematic theology with a history of doctrine, though many have tried to do it. Certainly I am not competent to do it. So although I will rely on past and contemporary thinkers at many points, I will not devote much time here to expounding their views.

To say that this book is exegetical is not to say that it focuses on new exegetical ideas. For the most part, I am sticking to interpretations of Scripture that are fairly obvious and commonplace. Reformed *doctrine* has traditionally been based on the main principles of Scripture, not individual verses alone. Although new interpretations of

13. John Murray's lectures in systematic theology consist almost entirely of the exegesis of biblical passages that establish Reformed doctrines. He explains his method in his important article "Systematic Theology," in *MCW*, 4:1–21.

verses appear from time to time, this process of change in exegetical theology generally does not lead to change in the church's doctrines. Further, I think the church's problems today are not usually problems that can be solved by novel interpretations of this or that passage. Our theological problems usually arise from our failure to note what is obvious.

Key Terms

Note: Key terms are listed in the approximate order in which they are treated in the text of each chapter.

Definition
 Theology (Barth)
 Theology (Schleiermacher)
 Theology (Hodge)
 Theology (Frame)
 Edification
 Application
 Exegetical theology
 Biblical theology
 Systematic theology
 Historical theology
 Practical theology
 Meaning

Study Questions

1. "Definitions are themselves theology." Explain; evaluate.
2. Is it wrong to develop theological terminology not found in Scripture itself? Why or why not?
3. "Nor should we assume that there is only one possible definition of something." Why shouldn't we assume this? Give an example of a term that may be defined in more than one way.
4. "The definition of *theology* cannot be a condensation of all the content of the Scriptures." Explain; evaluate.
5. "But Hodge, like many orthodox evangelical theologians, leaves us confused about an important question." What question? How does Frame answer it? How do you think we should answer that question?
6. What are the advantages in defining theology by reference to the *didasko* word-group of the NT? Do you see any disadvantages?
7. Frame believes that "theology today has become preoccupied by these auxiliary disciplines to the extent of neglecting its primary responsibility." What is that primary responsibility? What have recent theologians substituted for that primary

responsibility? How is this problem related to the current methods of training theologians? How is it related to the nature of seminary accreditation?

Memory Verses

Ps. 34:11: Come, O children, listen to me;
I will teach you the fear of the LORD.

1 Cor. 11:1: Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.

1 Tim. 4:6: If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed.

2 Tim. 2:1–2: You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.

Resources for Further Study

In addition to the specific suggestions that I make at the end of each chapter, it will be valuable for the student to compare the discussions here with those of other systematic theologies, such as those of Charles Hodge, Herman Bavinck, Louis Berkhof, Wayne Grudem, Robert Reymond, Douglas Kelly, and Richard Gamble.

Ames, William. *The Marrow of Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997. Influential Puritan work on the basics of theology. He defines theology as “the science of living before God.”

Calvin, John. *Institutes*. This is the most influential theological text of the Reformed tradition, and an admirable example of *theology as application*. Calvin referred to this volume as his *Summa Pietatis*, “summary of piety.” Cf. Aquinas’s *ST* and *SCG*.

Frame, John M. *DKG*, 76–85, 206–14.

Murray, John. “Systematic Theology,” in *MCW*, 4:1–21.

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