

"A must-read for those who seek to be challenged in their understanding of biblical and theological issues that face the church of Jesus Christ today."

—Kenneth Gary Talbot

JOHN FRAME'S
SELECTED
SHORTER WRITINGS

VOLUME ONE

JOHN M. FRAME

“*John Frame’s Selected Shorter Writings, Volume 1* is unique in several ways. For one, much of it reads more like a set of sermonic reflections than a compilation of theological essays. The highly practical nature of the work is likely due to the fact that now, reaching the end of his teaching career, Frame wants to impart ‘what are the most important thoughts I would like to leave to the next generation.’ The section on the use of Scripture in preaching is a virtual necessity for students of preaching. Next, since these are Frame’s ‘most important thoughts,’ I find myself savoring each word, even more so than when reading his other works. Everything the apostle Paul wrote is vitally important. But when I read Paul’s parting words to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20), I want to pay special attention, because here I’m exposed to some of his chief concerns. Finally, anyone who has read Frame’s *Theology of Lordship* series may have picked up on the way in which the theologian can crystallize and clarify a vital thought in a digression that can occur much later and under different subject headings. *Selected Shorter Writings* serves to elucidate a considerable number of subjects in Frame’s previously written works. It provides his clearest and most succinct explanation of perspectivalism.”

—**John Barber**, Pastor, Cornerstone Presbyterian Church, Palm Beach Gardens, Florida; Adjunct Professor, Fine Arts, Saints Bible Institute, San Lorenzo, Italy

“In the tradition of John Calvin (*Tracts and Treatises*), Jonathan Edwards (*Miscellanies*), and B. B. Warfield (*Selected Shorter Writings*), Frame has now published his own *Selected Shorter Writings, Volume 1*. As a seminary professor for more than four decades, he has distinguished himself as a prolific author and one of America’s foremost theologians and philosophers. Before this book was published, most of these rare theological, philosophical, and practical gems had been hidden away in his electronic files or posted on websites and blogs not widely known to the public. Do yourself a favor and mine the rich truths in these winsome and provocative essays (written

in Frame's inimitable style of robust charity) on a wide array of important topics. I highly recommend it!"

—**Steven L. Childers**, Associate Professor of Practical Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando; President and CEO, Global Church Advancement

"John wrote this book so that the average person could understand it, which is a concept introduced by the apostle Paul but little employed ever since. It's like the nine-hundred-pound gorilla wrestling with a newborn and restraining himself: John could do a number on us intellectually, but he prefers to communicate for the sake of the kingdom of God."

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

"John Frame is certainly one of those 'dangerous theologians.' Of course, that means he is mild and loving, even as he confronts error boldly and builds the necessary biblical-theological frameworks for our times. He covers many important topics with our necessary standards for accounting (cf. Heb. 4:12–13). We see more of the sea lanes traversed as he pursues that Great White Whale of biblical truth applied!"

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

"In comparison with the 'feast' of John Frame's major works, these are the 'nuggets.' They still offer vintage Frame, and I heartily recommend them for their wisdom, balance, and incisiveness. Some have a more personal, informal tone, and will usefully complement Frame's major writings, especially for those who want to understand the connection of his writings to the person behind them."

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

"This book is a veritable cornucopia of Frame's theology, and one will find here appetizing personal information no less than rigorously biblical analysis. Frame is not afraid to slay sacred cows ('narrative theology,' the

centrality of justification by faith alone, politically liberal evangelicalism, N. T. Wright's bibliology) if he believes they don't pass biblical muster. Whether you have never read Frame before or have read all that he's written to date, this book will inform, intrigue, encourage, edify, rouse, and convict you."

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

"Dr. Frame has produced a series of theological articles that will encourage the reader to consider more carefully the correct understanding of various Christian ideas encountered in the progress of dogmatic thought. Dr. Frame is committed to being biblical, with a focus on being balanced in one's theological perspective. For Professor Frame, being biblically balanced expresses his goal of a lifetime of teaching theology. He has sought not only to express orthodox doctrine from a biblical perspective, but also to convey a theology that is capable of affecting a Christian's total world and life view. Theology is not an abstract study. Understanding theology not only requires us to correctly understand the propositional truth of Scripture, but also seeks to engage each believer in his or her daily walk with Christ. This excellent book is a must-read for those who seek to be challenged in understanding the biblical and theological issues that face the church of Jesus Christ today."

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

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VOLUME 1

JOHN M. FRAME



P U B L I S H I N G

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To Vern, Richard, and Andrée
dangerous theologians all

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account. (Heb. 4:12–13)

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Foreword

JOHN M. FRAME (b. 1939) is a Calvinist theologian and American philosopher especially known for his work in systematic theology, Christian apologetics, and ethics. In the tradition of John Calvin (*Tracts and Treatises*),¹ Jonathan Edwards (*Miscellanies*),² B. B. Warfield (*Selected Shorter Writings*),³ and Herman Bavinck (*Selected Shorter Works*),⁴ Frame has now published his own *Selected Shorter Writings, Volume 1*.

Similar to those who have benefited only from J. I. Packer's more well-known books such as *Knowing God*,⁵ but have never tapped the riches of his lesser-known writings (e.g., his *Introductory Essay to John Owen's The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*),⁶ those who have benefited only from Frame's more well-known books can now mine the riches of his lesser-known, shorter writings.

Before publication of this book, most of these rare theological and philosophical gems had been hidden away as Frame's book appendices or as electronic files or articles posted on websites and blogs not widely known to the public. This book, however, is not merely a compilation of appendices and articles. Instead, these chapters are mostly unpublished

1. John Calvin and Henry Beveridge, *Tracts and Treatises of John Calvin* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004).

2. Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 13, *The Miscellanies: A–500*, ed. Thomas A. Schafer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994); vol. 18, *The Miscellanies: 501–832*, ed. Ava Chamberlain (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000); vol. 20, *The Miscellanies: 833–1152*, ed. Amy Plantinga Pauw (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002); vol. 23, *The Miscellanies: 1153–1360*, ed. Douglas A. Sweeney (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).

3. Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *Selected Shorter Writings*, ed. John Meeter (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001).

4. Herman Bavinck, *Selected Shorter Works* (Portland, OR: Monergism Books, 2011).

5. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 20th anniversary ed. (InterVarsity Press, 1993).

6. John Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ: A Treatise in Which the Whole Controversy about Universal Redemption Is Fully Discussed* (London: Banner of Truth, 1959).

essays of Frame's thought as part of the culmination of a remarkable career as an author and a teacher of theology and philosophy.

Building on his education at Princeton, Westminster Seminary, and Yale, Frame distinguished himself as an outstanding theologian during thirty-one years on the faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia and California. Since 2000, he has been on the faculty of Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando as professor of systematic theology and philosophy. He teaches apologetics, systematic theology, ethics, and history of philosophy and Christian thought.

During his decades as a seminary professor, Frame has distinguished himself as a prolific author, publishing books and articles not only in the areas of apologetics, theology, and ethics, but also in worship, film, music, and other media. Among his larger theological works is his highly acclaimed and award-winning Theology of Lordship series, including *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (1987),⁷ *The Doctrine of God* (2002),⁸ *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (2008),⁹ and *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (2010).¹⁰

Frame is especially noted for his work in epistemology and presuppositional apologetics. He is considered one of the foremost interpreters and critics of the thought of the late Christian apologist Cornelius Van Til, whom he studied under at Westminster Seminary. In Frame's first book, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (1987), he elaborates his Christian epistemology (which he calls *triperspectivalism*) and argues that in order to appreciate the richness of attaining true knowledge, a person must understand that knowledge always involves the integration of three perspectives: the normative, situational, and existential.

His triperspectivalism has made a profound impact on church leaders today, including his practical application of Christ's offices as Prophet (normative), Priest (existential), and King (situational) to all of life and ministry. Frame's passion to see the lordship of the triune God in every sphere of thought and life is contagious. And this needed

7. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987).

8. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002).

9. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008).

10. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010).

contagion is now spreading to multitudes of Christians and church leaders at a critical time.

Frame believes that those with Reformed and evangelical convictions are at risk of being marginalized in our generation because some Reformed leaders, both inside and outside the academy, espouse unbiblical views of such critical areas as worship, evangelism, Christian spirituality, church planting, missions, and the relationship of the church and culture.¹¹

But the good news is that God is raising up a new generation of church leaders and other Christians who are stemming this tide by standing for a robust Reformed theology that includes a biblical view of all these practical areas of ministry. And the theology and philosophy of John Frame is at the forefront, influencing this resurgence of biblical Calvinism among a new generation of church leaders.¹²

Frame represents a historic stream of biblical and philosophical thought¹³ deeply rooted in the best foundational contributions of Athanasius, Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas. In his writings you'll also find the biblical riches rediscovered by the church in the Protestant Reformation by Martin Luther and John Calvin, as well as the reshaping of those biblical truths in the seventeenth century by the English Puritans.

Frame's thought also reflects the Dutch Calvinism of Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck and the Princeton theology of Charles Hodge, B. B. Warfield, and J. Gresham Machen. He writes, "I yield to no one in admiration of three brilliant and godly men, friends of one another, who set the highest standards for Reformed theology in the 1900s: B. B. Warfield, Abraham Kuyper, and Herman Bavinck."¹⁴

A handful of professors profoundly shaped his thought while he was in seminary, including John Murray, Cornelius Van Til, Ed Clowney, and Norm Shepherd. The three authors he resorts to most often today

11. John M. Frame, *The Escondido Theology: A Reformed Response to Two Kingdom Theology* (Lakeland, FL: Whitefield Media Productions, 2011).

12. David Van Biema, "The New Calvinism—10 Ideas Changing the World Right Now," *Time*, March 12, 2009.

13. See the appendix at the end of this book for a list of the one hundred works that have most influenced John Frame's thought, by the authors referred to in these next few paragraphs.

14. John M. Frame, *Backgrounds to My Thought*, available at <http://www.frame-poythress.org/about/john-frame-full-bio/> (accessed May 16, 2013).

are Murray, Van Til, and Clowney.¹⁵ Van Til became the greatest single influence on Frame's apologetics and theology. Other significant influences on his theology include G. C. Berkouwer, R. John Rushdoony, Meredith Kline, and J. I. Packer.

Frame's understanding of philosophy has been shaped not only by many of the authors listed above but also by the writings of Plato, Immanuel Kant, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. His emphasis on the importance of not only knowledge and behavior in the Christian life, but also heart affections, is drawn significantly from the writings of Blaise Pascal and Jonathan Edwards (often through the works of John Gerstner and John Piper as Edwards's contemporary advocates).

Although Frame's primary understanding of Christian apologetics and evangelism has been shaped by Van Til, others have deepened and broadened that understanding, including C. S. Lewis, Francis Schaeffer, Gordon Clark, C. John (Jack) Miller, and Vern Poythress (one of his many students whom he now refers to as his teachers).

As a result of integrating these diverse schools of thought over decades, John Frame is a rare biblical scholar who has a passion not only for people to gain a biblical understanding of theology, philosophy, apologetics, and ethics, but also for people to learn how to apply these disciplines to practical ministries such as worship, evangelism, discipleship, church planting, and missions. That's because, to John Frame, "theology is application."¹⁶

Frame is marked by both genuine humility and great courage. Knowing that he might be accused of being a theological liberal, he continues to stand against fractured denominationalism, and to fight for greater ecumenical unity in the church.

Knowing that he might be accused of being a theological fundamentalist, he continues to stand against moderate views of Scripture, and to fight for an infallible, inerrant Bible.

Knowing that he might be accused of being a cultural transformationist (and triumphalist), he continues to stand against pessimistic

15. Ibid.

16. Frame, *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 1–100.

theological dualism that wrongly separates the church and culture, and to fight for the optimistic, biblical social engagement of Christians as witnesses to the lordship of Christ over all areas of public life.

Knowing that he might be accused of being a cultural isolationist (and pessimist), he continues to stand against theological views of God's kingdom that wrongly equate the priority of the institutional church ministries of the Word and social action, and to fight for understanding the primary purpose of the institutional church as making disciples of all nations through prioritizing the ministries of evangelism and the Word.

Knowing that he might be accused of being a traditionalist, he continues to stand against rapidly emerging, individualistic expressions of "Churchless Christianity," and to fight for the biblical necessity for all Christians to come under the spiritual authority and care of a local church body, through which they prioritize the regular, corporate ministries of the Word, sacrament, and prayer.

Knowing that he might be accused of being a pietist (and revivalist), he continues to stand against theological views that wrongly emphasize the communal dimensions of Christianity at the expense of the personal, and to fight for the biblical validity and need for all Christians to pursue holiness through personal spiritual disciplines such as regular Bible reading, prayer, and fasting.

Knowing that he might be accused of being an out-of-touch, ivory-tower academic, he continues to stand against the trend of church leaders' not receiving seminary training, and to fight for the importance of well-educated church leaders.

Knowing that he might be accused of being opposed to traditional seminary training, he continues to stand against the inherent problems with the traditional seminary model, and to fight for more innovative, practical, church-based seminary training models.

At Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando (RTS-O), where John and I have served together as resident faculty members for thirteen years, we have heard a description over the years of those who are Reformed (Calvinistic) in theology as being on a theological continuum that ranges from the broadly evangelical (BE) on the one end to the truly Reformed (TR) on the other.

BEs are those who normally emphasize their evangelical theological convictions more strongly than their Reformed convictions. And at the other end of the continuum, TRs normally emphasize their Reformed theological convictions more strongly than their evangelical convictions. So what is John Frame—a BE or a TR? He is neither. Frame is in a completely different category called WR—“Winsomely Reformed.” Someone who is WR cannot be identified as normally being at any one particular point on this Calvinistic continuum between the BEs and the TRs. That’s because a WR has the unique capacity to function wisely and well anywhere across the doctrinally diverse continuum of evangelicalism—yet still hold strongly to his theologically Reformed convictions.

John Frame is the epitome of someone who is WR. This is why it’s been so difficult for people to categorize him. In some contexts, he will overtly emphasize his Reformed convictions. But in other contexts, he will intentionally emphasize only his broader evangelical convictions. This confusing behavior is not because he is fearful or compromising his beliefs, but because he has learned to base his words and emphases on what is most appropriate in each unique context. Frame has a strong commitment to evangelical theology in general and to Reformed theology in particular, coupled with godly wisdom to know in which context and to what extent one or the other should be emphasized.

One would understandably think that a scholar with Frame’s intellectual rigor and theological acumen would likely carry with him an aura of haughtiness. Instead, as one who has had an office next to him since 2000, I can tell you firsthand that John is a man marked by a rare blend of remarkable intellect and authentic humility.¹⁷ He is a model of living out what he writes about in his popular booklet *Studying Theology as a Servant of Jesus*¹⁸ (his grandfatherly advice written originally for incoming students at RTS-O).¹⁹

17. With his nearly five decades of participation in seminary convocation and commencement ceremonies, I know of no one who has worn academic regalia more often, and holds wearing it in more disdain, than Frame.

18. John M. Frame, *Studying Theology as a Servant of Jesus* (Orlando: Reformed Theological Seminary, 2002).

19. As one of the “Fathers” (older professors) at RTS-O, Frame has also had a significant personal influence on all the “Brothers” (younger professors—including me). For instance,

Those who engage John in theological or philosophical debate (and there are many) experience his charitable and fair spirit—his genuine willingness to take a serious look at both sides of an issue. He’s well known for treating an opposing view graciously and respectfully, even while deconstructing it.

Many don’t know that John is also a classically trained musician (piano and organ) and a critic of film, music, and other media. His passion for and writings on worship and music have provoked controversy, especially in Reformed circles, because he regards contemporary worship music, and even liturgical dance, as biblically permissible and even enjoyable in worship.

John often confuses people because on a Sunday he can enjoy leading a new church plant in informal worship by playing an electric keyboard as part of a contemporary music ensemble. Then on Wednesday of the same week, he can greatly enjoy leading the seminary community in formal worship by playing a sixteenth-century hymn on the majestic, custom-built organ in the RTS-O chapel.

Chapter 38 of this book is titled “Twenty-five Random Things That Nobody Knows about Me.” This list came from a Facebook game that his students “dragged [him] into.” What I love about this final chapter is that it gives you a glimpse into the personal life of this renowned theologian and philosopher. Here are a few of my favorite things:

- #3: I was always the last guy chosen for sports teams, and with good reason.
- #4: We listened faithfully to Pittsburgh Pirate games from 1950–56, when the team had the worst record in baseball.
- #18: My priorities for ministry were (a) missions, (b) pastorate, (c) academic theology. A visit to mission fields in 1960 ruled out (a). A year and two summers of pastoral experience ruled out (b). So I embraced (c) by default, as God’s calling.

almost every time I see him, he asks me the same question: “Tell me again, how’s your book coming along?”

- #23: I did not marry until I was forty-five. God was preparing someone special.
- #24: In 1999, I led a worship team of myself, a saxophonist, and a trombonist. The other two musicians were in their late seventies, but we really rocked.

John has shared with me how he is sometimes concerned about spending so much time in the privacy of his office writing, rather than being more actively involved in public ministry. So I have often reminded him that there's nothing more practical than sound theology. I've seen firsthand how his theological writings are having a significant practical impact on the lives and ministries of Christian leaders around the world.

John is much more than a theologian, philosopher, and apologist. He is also a loving husband to Mary, father to his grown children, and grandfather to his rapidly growing gaggle of grandchildren. He is a humble and quiet man who prefers writing in the solitude of his office to coming into the public limelight.

All this is to say that it's worth your time to read through these rare theological and philosophical gems in Frame's *Selected Shorter Writings, Volume 1*. Here you will find his "Primer on Perspectivalism"—a clear, concise summary of triperspectivalism that will enhance your knowledge of God, yourself, others, and the world. Other chapters include foundational topics such as these: "What the Bible Is About: One Thing and Three Things," "The Gospel and the Scriptures," "Introduction to the Reformed Faith," and "The Main Thing."

Then enter more deeply into Frame's ongoing humble but bold dialogues by reading essays such as "Reformed and Evangelicals Together," "Is Justification by Faith Alone the Article on Which the Church Stands or Falls?," "N. T. Wright and the Authority of Scripture," "Cultural Transformation and the Local Church," "The Bible and Joe the Plumber," and, of course, the rest of the "Twenty-five Random Things That Nobody Knows about Me."

If you're new to reading the works of John Frame (or theological works in general), let me strongly encourage you to take the time to

explore his other writings. Here are just a few introductory readings I recommend that you consider to begin priming your theological pump:

- *Salvation Belongs to the Lord*²⁰—a brief mini-systematic theology that is easily accessible to the average reader.
- *Studying Theology as a Servant of Jesus*—practical advice for incoming seminary students and all new students of theology.
- Browse his website, <http://www.frame-poythress.org>, where you'll find many of his writings. He shares this website with Vern Poythress, Calvinistic theologian, philosopher, New Testament scholar, and one of his former students.

Whether or not you're new to reading Frame's theological works, sooner or later you must own and begin making regular use of his magnum opus—*Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief*.²¹ This remarkably accessible and practical work is the culmination of his nearly fifty years of studying, writing, teaching, and applying the Word of God to all aspects of life.

I am extremely grateful to God for this man and his ministry. This is why I so strongly promote the reading of his books and articles in all my seminary classes and at the church leadership training events where I speak and teach in North America and abroad. It is a great privilege for me to commend this book to you. Here you'll find a wide array of important topics written in Frame's inimitable style of robust charity. Enjoy mining the rich truths in these winsome and provocative essays!

Steve Childers
Associate Professor of Practical Theology
Reformed Theological Seminary-Orlando
President & CEO, Global Church Advancement

20. John M. Frame, *Salvation Belongs to the Lord: An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006).

21. John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013).

Preface

THIS IS A book consisting of short articles on various subjects. I think of this book as something like Jonathan Edwards's *Miscellanies* or the two volumes of B. B. Warfield's *Selected Shorter Writings*. Not that I expect these essays to be as valuable as those of Edwards and Warfield, but I think of this book as part of that genre.

My original working title was *Theological Appendices*, mocking myself a bit. My larger works, the Theology of Lordship series, have been laden with "appendices"—shorter articles supplementing the larger treatments. Now I write a book consisting only of appendices, in this case appendices to my own career as a teacher of theology. But my publisher, P&R, has chosen to echo Warfield by calling this book *Selected Shorter Writings*. Indeed, I'm hoping further to parallel Warfield by publishing a second volume of these essays.

Although there are recurring themes through this series of essays, and one will often supplement the discussion in another, I think of these essays as independent. So there will sometimes be overlap between the content of one and that of another. I've thought it more important to preserve the integrity of each essay than to try to combine them all into a regular book.

Most of the essays have not been published or posted before, but a few of them have been. My article "N. T. Wright and the Authority of Scripture" was published in *Did God Really Say?*¹ but I thought it could use some additional exposure. "A Primer on Perspectivalism" has been on the Frame-Poythress website for a while, but I am hoping its publication here will bring it a larger readership. Similarly with "Introduction to the Reformed Faith." "Twenty-five Random Things" originated on Facebook.

Thanks again to P&R Publishing for its willingness to publish my work, and especially to John J. Hughes and Karen L. Magnuson, who edited the volume.

1. David B. Garner, ed., *Did God Really Say? Affirming the Truthfulness and Trustworthiness of Scripture* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2012), 107–27.

Abbreviations

AGG	John M. Frame, <i>Apologetics to the Glory of God: An Introduction</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1994)
CVT	John M. Frame, <i>Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1995)
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: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987)
DWG	John M. Frame, <i>The Doctrine of the Word of God</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010)
ESV	English Standard Version
KJV	King James Version
LW	N. T. Wright, <i>The Last Word: Scripture and the Authority of God</i> (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005)
NKJV	New King James Version
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
SBL	John M. Frame, <i>Salvation Belongs to the Lord</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006)
SC	N. T. Wright, <i>Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense</i> (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006)

<i>ST</i>	John M. Frame, <i>Systematic Theology</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013)
<i>VE</i>	<i>Vox Evangelica</i>
WCF	Westminster Confession of Faith
WLC	Westminster Larger Catechism
WSC	Westminster Shorter Catechism
<i>WTJ</i>	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>



PART 1

Theology and Theological Method

A Primer on Perspectivalism

PERSPECTIVALISM is a name that has come to refer to some aspects of my theological method and that of my friend and colleague Vern Poythress. We have set it forth especially in Poythress's *Symphonic Theology*¹ and Frame's *DKG*, and we have applied this method in a number of other writings.

Recently, someone asked whether there were an article-length introduction to perspectivalism, and I had to admit that there was not. There are some *fairly* concise introductions,² but nothing of “article length.” Seeing that as a genuine need, I will try to meet it here.³

Perspectivalism in General

I employ perspectivalisms of two kinds: as a general concept, and as a more specific method. The general concept is simply that because

1. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987, also available at http://www.frame-poythress.org/poythress_books.htm.

2. Poythress's *Symphonic Theology* is more concise, certainly, than my *DKG*. The student of perspectivalism might also look at my short book *Perspectives on the Word of God* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999), also available at <http://reformedperspectives.org> (search under this title). Chapters 3 and 4 of my *DCL* introduce the subject as it pertains to ethics, and the first seven chapters of my *DG* develop an exegetical argument for the concept of divine lordship that underlies this approach. There is also an old lecture of mine, “Epistemological Perspectives and Evangelical Apologetics,” from 1982, given before the Evangelical Theological Society, that introduces these concepts as they pertain to apologetics. It is available at http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/1982Epistemological.html. And my student and good friend Joe Torres has summarized my approach in a Wikipedia article about me: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Frame. Cf. also mini-descriptions and defenses of the concept in *DG*, app. C, 767–68, and in my article “Machen's Warrior Children,” in *Alister E. McGrath and Evangelical Theology*, ed. Sung Wook Chung (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), also available at http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/2003Machen.htm.

3. I absolutely forbid anyone to call it “Perspectivalism for Dummies.”

we are not God, because we are finite, not infinite, we cannot know everything at a glance, and therefore our knowledge is limited to one perspective or another.

God knows absolutely everything, because he planned everything, made everything, and determines what happens in the world he made. So we describe him as omniscient. One interesting implication of God's omniscience is that he not only knows all the facts about himself and the world, but also knows how everything appears from every possible perspective. If a fly were on my office wall, my typing would look very different to that fly from the way it looks to me. But God knows not only everything about my typing, but also how that typing appears to the fly on the wall. Indeed, because God knows hypothetical situations as well as actualities, God knows exhaustively what a fly in that position would experience—*if* such a fly were present, even if it is not. God's knowledge, then, is not only omniscient, but omniperspectival. God knows from his own infinite perspective; but that infinite perspective includes a knowledge of all created perspectives, possible and actual.

But we are different. We are finite, and our knowledge is finite. I can know the world only from the limited perspective of my own body and mind. The effects of this finitude, and even more of sin, should caution us against cocksureness in our claims to knowledge. I am not saying that we should doubt everything. Certainly my limited perspective gives me no excuse to doubt that I have five fingers, or that $2 + 2 = 4$, or that God exists.⁴ Our finitude does not imply that all our knowledge is erroneous, or that certainty is impossible.⁵ But we do, in most situations, need to guard against mistakes.

One way to increase our knowledge and our level of certainty is by supplementing our own perspectives with those of others. When our own resources fail us, we can consult friends, authorities, books, and so on. We can travel to other places, visit people of other cultures.

4. Romans 1:18–32 teaches that the existence of the God of Scripture is clear, even known, to all human beings. Thus the profession of agnosticism or atheism, or the acknowledgment of a different God, is the repression of knowledge. People disbelieve, though they know better.

5. How certainty can be obtained is discussed in my *DKG*. See also my article "Certainty" at http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/2005Certainty.htm, chapter 41 on "Assurance" in *DWG*, and corresponding chapters in my *ST*.

Even to get a good understanding of a tree, we need to walk around it, look at it from many angles.

It often happens that someone's idea will seem ridiculous when we first encounter it; but when we try to understand where that person is coming from, what considerations have led him to his idea, then our evaluation of it changes. In such a case, we are trying to see the issue from his perspective, and that perspective enriches our own.

In one sense, of course, it is impossible to transcend one's own perspective. Even when we move around a tree, or consult a friend, or travel to another culture, we are still viewing reality through our own senses and brains. Yet it is possible for the perspectives of others to change our perspective, to make us see differently.

This does not mean, of course, that all ideas are equally true, or equally false. It does not mean that as our perspective grows larger, we inevitably agree with everybody else. I do think that a broadening of perspective usually leads to a greater appreciation of the viewpoints of others. But sometimes a growth in perspective has the opposite effect: it convinces us that the view we are investigating is simply wrong. There is nothing about perspectivalism that eliminates the distinctions between right and wrong, true and false. So perspectivalism is not relativistic, as is sometimes charged.⁶

Rather, it presupposes absolutism. To say that our own views are finite is to contrast them with the absolute, infinite viewpoint of God himself. And we are able to consult God and, through his Word and prayer, in some measure to access his infinite perspective. I say "in some measure." We will never have God's exhaustive knowledge of reality (not even in heaven). And we will never know the world in the same way God knows it, for to do that we would have to be God. But when God speaks to us in Scripture and grants us wisdom in response to prayer, the human knowledge we obtain is warranted by his own exhaustive

6. It is somewhat unfortunate that the name *perspectivalism* has been attached to the view I am advocating. I'm not sure who is responsible for the name; maybe I am. But the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche sometimes described his own view as *perspectivism* (note the different spelling), and in my judgment Nietzsche's perspectivism is indeed relativist, though there is some wisdom to be gained from his observations. The same may be said of the perspectivalism (he did use the *-al* suffix) of Charles Sanders Peirce.

perspective, the perspective that includes all other perspectives. For example, Scripture tells me that God created the heavens and the earth. That knowledge can never be invalidated by any other perspective. It is true from any possible perspective.⁷

Again, it is not that we come to look at things from God's perspective rather than our own. We are not God, so we cannot see things as he does. And we can never step out of our own skin, so to speak, and set aside the perspective of our own thoughts and bodies. But as we can enrich our perspective by looking at things from different angles (a tree, in the example above), by consulting other people, and by observing other places and cultures, much more can we enrich it by consulting God's perspective.

In this sense, the truth in one perspective includes the truth of all the others, including God's. To maximize my own knowledge, I need the knowledge of everyone else, especially that of God. So to see everything perfectly from my own perspective involves seeing everything from everyone else's perspective, and from God's. In that sense, finite perspectives are dependent on God's and interdependent on one another's. My perspective should ideally include yours, and vice versa. An exhaustive view of the universe from my perspective (if that were possible, which it is not) would have to be enriched by yours and everyone else's, including that of God, and, indeed, that of the fly on my wall. So my perspective must include yours, and yours must include mine. In that sense, all finite perspectives are *interdependent*. God's perspective is independent in a way that our perspectives are not, for God governs all perspectives. But even his knowledge, as we have seen, includes a knowledge of all finite perspectives. And all finite perspectives must, to attain truth, "think God's thoughts after him."⁸ So in one sense, all perspectives coincide.

7. I am here, of course, simplifying the hermeneutical issue. Surely we do make mistakes in biblical interpretation, and those mistakes, like others, can be alleviated by broader perspectives. But the ultimate goal of hermeneutics is, with the above qualifications, to attain the divine perspective. I believe that, at least with relatively simple texts such as Genesis 1:1, the church has attained that perspective. But more must be said, of course, and I address some of those issues in *DWG*. See also Vern S. Poythress, *God-Centered Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1999).

8. I have discussed at length in *DKG*, 18–40, and in *CVT*, 97–113, how the so-called "contents" of God's mind differ from the "contents" of man's. This difficult question was debated

Each, when fully informed, includes all the knowledge found in every other. There is one truth, and each perspective is merely an angle from which that truth can be viewed.

We will never achieve perfect knowledge of that one truth, but we advance toward it step by step. That advance always involves enriching our present perspectives by referring to those of others. The work of attaining knowledge, therefore, is always communal. And inevitably it involves reference to the perfect, exhaustive perspective of God, insofar as he has revealed it to us.

Often, however, God's revelation to us of his own perspective is itself multiperspectival in structure. He has, for example, given us four gospels, rather than one. It is important for us to hear the story of Jesus from four different perspectives. God's perspective, in this case, embraces those of the four gospel writers. His infinite perspective validates those four human perspectives and commends them to all of us. Similarly, God has given us both Kings and Chronicles, though these books overlap in many ways. He has also given us both a prose account (Ex. 12–14) and a poetic account (Ex. 15:1–18) of his deliverance of Israel from Egypt. Many of the psalms, too, give us poetic accounts of what other Scriptures present in prose narrative. There are two givings of the law (Ex. 20:1–17; Deut. 5:1–21). Paul often repeats his ideas (as Rom. 12 and 1 Cor. 12), adding and subtracting matters of interest, varying their contexts.

Scripture, of course, is written by human authors together with the divine Author. God reveals himself by inspiring human beings. He generally does not dictate, but rather enables them to write consistently with their own gifts, education, and personalities, that is, their own perspectives. And by such divine enablement, each author writes exactly

during the controversy in the 1940s between Cornelius Van Til and Gordon H. Clark. My own view is that whatever is in God's mind inevitably differs from everything in a man's, for God's mind is the ultimate Creator of the human mind, as well as its criterion of truth and its sustenance. Even in the area of thought and knowledge, therefore, the Creator-creature distinction is inviolate. This does not imply, however, that God and man cannot know the same propositions. The common expression "think God's thoughts after him" should be understood to express both the continuities ("think God's thoughts") and the discontinuities ("after him") between God's knowledge and ours.

what God wants him to write. And God often determines that his truth is best conveyed by multiple human perspectives rather than just one. In Scripture, all those human perspectives convey truth, and all are warranted by God's infinite perspective, though none is identical with that divine perspective. This is what we should expect, since God has created us as people who learn through multiperspectival experience.

Triperspectivalism

Now, if perspectivalism is true in general, it is an important part of human knowledge to focus on specific differences of perspective. So, for example, NT scholars often give attention to the samenesses and differences of the four Gospels. This is a legitimate study, though it is often done without adequate regard to the unity of Scripture. In my *DCL*, I argue that the Ten Commandments provide ten perspectives on human life. It is not that each commandment deals with a *part* of Christian ethics; rather, each commandment deals with the whole, from a particular perspective. We might call such an approach to Christian ethics *decapectivalism*.

But Poythress and I emphasize especially the importance of a set of threefold distinctions, or triads, that have come to be known as *triperspectivalism*. Many people have seen a certain mystery in the number three. But in Scripture there is a pervasive pattern of threefold distinctions that, though mysterious, provide us with considerable illumination.

The Trinity

The greatest mystery in Scripture and Christian theology is, of course, the mystery of the Holy Trinity.⁹ We worship one God, but that one God is three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The three persons are one God, not many. The nature of each person is divine. Each person has all the divine attributes, and in every act of God the

9. For a much more thorough account of the doctrine of the Trinity and its biblical basis, see my *DG*, 619–735. See also Poythress's application of this doctrine to logic and epistemology in "Reforming Ontology and Logic in the Light of the Trinity: An Application of Van Til's Idea of Analogy," *WTJ* 57, 1 (1995): 187–219, also available at http://www.frame-poythress.org/poythress_articles/1995Reforming.htm.

three persons equally participate. The three persons are equal in honor and glory; they are equally (and uniquely) the object of our worship.

The three persons, however, are not identical to one another. They are in various ways distinct. Theologians have explored concepts such as *eternal generation* and *eternal procession*: the Father eternally begets the Son, not the other way around, and the Spirit proceeds from the Father and Son, not the other way around. The Bible also records divine acts that are specific to one of the persons or another. It was the Son, not the Father or Spirit, who became incarnate, died for our sins, and rose again. It is the Father, not the Son or Spirit, who effectually calls us into fellowship with himself. And it is the Spirit, not the Father or Son, who regenerates believers and gives them gifts to serve in the church. Still, even in these actions, all three of the persons are active. Although the Son, not the Father, became incarnate, the Father was present with him in his incarnate life. And although the Son, not the Father, died on the cross, the Father was active in the atonement, giving him up for us all (Rom. 8:32). To summarize: even in the distinct actions of each person, the other persons are involved. Or, as Scripture sometimes puts it, the Father and Spirit are “in” the Son; the Son is “in” the Father; and the Spirit is the Spirit of the Son and of the Father.¹⁰

It is tempting, therefore, for us to formulate the doctrine of the Trinity by saying that the three persons are “perspectives” on the Godhead and on one another. But that would be misleading. *Perspective* does not exhaust the ways in which the three persons are distinct. To say that the three persons are merely perspectives on the Godhead would be a Sabellian position, the idea that the differences of the persons are merely differences in the way we look at the one God. Such an approach would reduce the Trinitarian distinctions to distinctions within our own subjectivity. That certainly is not right.

It is correct to say that the three persons are really persons. They interact with one another in ways similar to the ways in which human beings interact with one another. They talk together, plan together, express love for one another. So their relation is far more than merely perspectival.

10. This mutual indwelling of the persons in one another is called *circumincessio* or *perichoresis*.

But if the three persons are not *mere* perspectives on the Godhead, they nevertheless *are* perspectives. They are more than perspectives, but not less. For as I have indicated, each of the three persons bears the whole divine nature, with all the divine attributes. Each is *in* each of the others. So you cannot fully know the Son without knowing the Father and Spirit, and so on. Although the three persons are distinct, our knowledge of each involves knowledge of the others, so that for us knowledge of the Father coincides with knowledge of the Son and Spirit.

Let us now explore a bit more fully the nature of our human perspectival knowledge of the three persons of the Trinity. Although all three persons are active in every act of God,¹¹ there seems to be a general division of labor among the persons in the work of redemption. The Father establishes the eternal plan of salvation, the Son executes it, and the Spirit applies it to people. It was the Father who sent the Son to redeem us, the Son who accomplished redemption, and the Spirit who applies the benefits of Christ's atonement to believers. Recall John Murray's book *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*:¹² under "redemption accomplished," Murray discusses the atonement, completed once for all. Under "redemption applied," he discusses the *ordo salutis*, the ways in which the Spirit applies the work of Christ to believers (effectual calling, regeneration, conversion, justification, etc.).

Generalizing, we gather that the Father is the supreme *authority*, the Son the *executive power*, and the Spirit the divine *presence* who dwells in and with God's people.

Now, of course, redemption is meaningless without all three of these aspects. Without an authoritative plan, an effectual accomplishment, and a gracious application, none of these has meaning. The application is necessarily the application of Christ's finished work according to the divine plan. The atonement is necessarily the fulfillment of the Father's plan, and without the Spirit's work it does not save. So the plan is not efficacious without the atonement and the application.

11. That is to say, every act *ad extra*, every act that has some reference to the creation. There are also divine acts *ad intra*, acts within the divine nature itself, such as the Father's begetting the Son, which are *not* acts in which three persons cooperate, but acts of one person alone.

12. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955.

So we cannot know any of these adequately without knowing the others. Although the three are distinguishable, our knowledge of each is a perspective on the others and on the whole. To know the Spirit's work, we must see it as an application of the Son's work by the Father's plan. Similarly with knowing the work of the Father and Son.

So our *knowledge* of the work of the three persons is perspectival. In a sense, these divine works are also perspectival in their *nature*. Although they are distinguishable, it is important to realize that the divine plan includes the atonement and its application; the atonement is the out-working of the plan and the event to be applied; and the application is the application of the plan and the atonement. As is the Trinity itself, these divine acts are mysteriously one and many.

Divine Lordship

So we have a general distinction in God's redemption between authority, power, and presence. Each of these is a necessary aspect of divine redemption, and none of them makes sense without the others. Each includes the others in one sense. These same concepts appear in an analysis of divine lordship.¹³

By *Lord* I refer to the mysterious name of Exodus 3:14–15, read *Yahweh* by scholars, but *LORD* in most English translations. With its Hebrew synonym *Adon* and its Greek equivalent *kurios*, it is found over seven thousand times in Scripture, mostly as a name of God and often applied to Jesus Christ. It is central in the biblical story. God says that this is his memorial name forever (Ex. 3:15), and he performs many mighty works so that people “shall know that I am the LORD” (e.g., Ex. 14:4). The fundamental confessions of faith of both Testaments (Deut. 6:4–5; Rom. 10:9–10; 1 Cor. 12:3; Phil. 2:11) are confessions of lordship. One may say that the basic message of the OT is “God is LORD” and that the basic message of the NT is “Jesus Christ is Lord.”

In passages such as Exodus 3:20; 33:19; 34:6–7; and Isaiah 40–66, which underscore and expound the lordship of God, three themes appear

13. In my writing, the most extensive exegetical account of divine lordship is found in the first seven chapters of *DG*.

prominently: the Lord is (1) the One who *controls* all things by his mighty power; (2) the One who speaks with absolute *authority*, rightly requiring all to obey, and (3) the One who gives himself to his people in covenant intimacy: “I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God” (Ex. 6:7). I call the third concept *presence* because God often expresses it by saying, “I will be with you” (e.g., Isa. 43:2), and he makes that presence tangible in such theophanies as the cloud and fire that led Israel through the wilderness, the *shekinah* glory that dwelt in the tabernacle and temple, the incarnation of Christ, and the Holy Spirit’s indwelling of believers.

Again, the three concepts are perspectively related. Each implies the others and involves the others.

The Decalogue is a good example of this threefold structure.¹⁴ It begins with God’s identifying himself by his name, *LORD*. Then there is a brief account (called by scholars a *historical prologue*) of God’s past benefits to Israel (“who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery”). The historical prologue displays God’s gracious power, his *control* over events on Israel’s behalf. Then there are commands, which display his *authority*. Mixed with the commands, there are sanctions: blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. This indicates the *presence* of the Lord to continue administering the covenant with Israel.

Revelation

Scripture teaches a corresponding threefold structure in divine revelation. There is “general” revelation, God’s revelation in creation (Ps. 19:1; Rom. 1). Then there is “special” revelation, God’s revelation in words, through a direct voice (Ex. 19–20), prophets (Deut. 18), apostles (John 14:26), and writing (Ex. 31:18; Josh. 1:8; 2 Tim. 3:16). A third form of revelation is described in Matthew 11:27 and Ephesians 1:17 in which

14. I follow Meredith Kline’s argument that the Decalogue, and Deuteronomy as well, have the literary structure of covenant documents. *Covenant*, of course, is the fundamental relation between Yahweh and Israel, and the *new covenant* is the fundamental relation between Christ and the redeemed. *Lord* denotes the relation of a covenant head to his vassals. So lordship and covenant go together.

God reveals Christ to a person's heart. This is sometimes described as *illumination*, or as the *internal testimony of the Holy Spirit*. I sometimes call it *existential revelation*.

God reveals himself as Lord. So his revelation parallels his lordship attributes. General revelation particularly manifests his control, for his power is exhaustive and universal, so that everything reveals him. Special revelation corresponds especially to his authority, for when God speaks to us, his words serve as ultimate norm for those who hear. Existential revelation is a form of God's presence with his human creatures.

The Bible is the written form of God's special revelation. (Other forms include God's oral speech through theophany, prophets, and apostles.) The Bible plays a special role, for it serves as the covenant document, the ultimate governing constitution of God's people (see texts above). As such, we may not question or disobey what it says.¹⁵

The Offices of Christ

The Reformed confessions and other theological documents often discuss the three offices of Christ as Prophet, Priest, and King. These offices reflect the same categories we have seen earlier. His kingship represents his *control*, his prophetic office his *authority* as the Word of God, and his priesthood his work on behalf of his people in history, what we have called his *presence*.

Since believers are united with Christ, many have drawn analogies between these offices and the status of believers. We, too, are prophets in the sense that we bear the gospel message to the world. We are kings in that "all things are ours" (cf. 1 Cor. 3:21–23). And we are priests in the sense of 1 Peter 2:9 (what the Reformers called "the priesthood of all believers"). In turn, these offices have been seen as models for church officers: the teaching elder (1 Tim. 5:17) represents especially God's authority, the ruling elder (same verse) God's control, and the deacon the priestly ministry of mercy. As perspectives, none of these gifts can function adequately without the others. But sometimes one or another is more prominent. Indeed, there are sometimes imbalances in churches

15. I have developed this understanding of revelation in more detail in *DWG*.

that have too much emphasis on teaching, discipline, or mercy at the expense of the others.¹⁶

Aspects of Salvation

Salvation involves: (1) God's acting mightily in history to redeem his people, his controlling power expressing itself in grace. The historical prologue of the Decalogue is a good example of this. This historical action is what we earlier called *redemption accomplished*. (2) God's speaking an authoritative word to proclaim this grace and to indicate his people's continuing obligations to him. Theologically speaking, this is the "law of God." (3) God's coming to be among and within his people. This is "redemption applied." Again, three aspects, corresponding to the three lordship attributes. None of these functions without the others. So each is a perspective on the whole process of salvation. Again, there are dangers in overemphasizing one of these over against the others.

Human Knowledge of God

A biblical epistemology will also acknowledge these three elements. Secular epistemologies have found it difficult to relate sense experience, reason, and feelings in their accounts of human knowledge. They have also been perplexed by the relation of the subject (the knower), the object (what the knower knows), and the norms or rules of knowledge (logic, reason, etc.).

In Scripture, sense experience (as in 1 John 1:1–3) presents us with the truth. But that truth must be understood in the light of God's norms, his verbal revelation. And the knower must not resist the truth. He or she must be in proper shape to receive it (Rom. 1).

So God has placed the knowing subject into fruitful contact with the objects of knowledge, with the mediation of God's revealed norms for knowledge, particularly the primacy of his revelation.

Here the object is the world as God has made it and controls it; the norm is God's authoritative revelation; and the subject is the person

16. See Jim Fitzgerald, *Triplex: The Three Faces of Leadership* (available for Kindle by Amazon Digital Services, 2010).

who lives in the presence of God. Sense experience connects us with the world, but only if the self is able to make such connections governed by God's Word.

So the three aspects of knowledge correspond to the attributes of God's lordship. The object is the world as God's *control* has made it and maintained it. The norm is God's *authority* for human knowledge. And the subject is the knower, standing in the *presence* of God.

These three aspects of knowledge are perspectival. You can't have one without the others, and with each, you will have the others. Every item of true human knowledge is the application of God's authoritative norm to a fact of creation, by a person in God's image. Take away one of those, and there is no knowledge at all.

So I distinguish three perspectives of knowledge. In the *normative perspective*, we ask the question, "What do God's norms direct us to believe?" In the *situational perspective*, we ask, "What are the facts?" In the *existential perspective*, we ask, "What belief is most satisfying to a believing heart?" Given the view of knowledge outlined above, the answers to these three questions coincide. But it is sometimes useful to distinguish these questions so as to give us multiple angles of inquiry. Each question helps us to answer the others.

The normative perspective, therefore, contains all reality, for all reality is God's general revelation to us. Similarly, the situational contains all reality, our whole environment. And the existential perspective also contains everything, namely, all our experience.

In an important sense, then, the normative perspective includes the situational and existential. To think according to God's norms is to take every fact (situational) and every experience (existential) into account. It is also true that the situational perspective includes the normative (for norms are facts) and the existential (for experiences are facts). And the existential includes the normative and the situational, for the norms and facts are aspects of our experience.

What role, then, does the Bible play in our knowledge of God and of his world? As we have seen, the Bible is the covenant constitution of the people of God, the highest authority, which we may not question. Thus, it is natural to consider it part of the normative perspective. But it is also part

of our situation (the fact that illumines all other facts) and of our experience (the experience that illumines all others). So the Bible should not be identified with the normative perspective or vice versa. Each perspective includes everything, as we have seen. But the Bible is a particular fact that governs all perspectives and determines how we should use them.

Our *understanding* of the Bible is multiperspectival. To comprehend the Bible, we must understand it in its historical environment (situational) and we must understand its relevance to us today (situational and existential). But once we come to a prayerful, thoughtful, settled understanding of Scripture's teaching, that teaching must take precedence over knowledge from any other source.

Remember: the normative, situational, and existential perspectives are mutually dependent, and so relative to one another. So some critics of perspectivalism sometimes think that this approach makes the Bible relative to other forms of knowledge. But that is an error. The Bible is not the normative perspective (or the situational or the existential). It is a particular object within all three perspectives given to us by God to serve as the ultimate standard of human thought and life.¹⁷

Ethics

The same perspectives govern the quest for ethical knowledge, the knowledge of right and wrong.¹⁸ As secular epistemology has been divided along three lines corresponding with these perspectives, so secular ethics has been existential (basing ethical judgments on feelings), teleological (focusing on happiness), or deontological (focusing on duties). I see these as existential, situational, and normative, respectively. These fail in various ways to account for the nature of ethical decisions. One major problem is that most ethicists try to separate these three perspectives from one another.

A biblical ethic will include all three perspectives. Normatively, we seek to obey God's authoritative Word, his law. Situationally, we

17. The preceding section summarizes the epistemology expounded at greater length in *DKG*. I have also reformulated this material for the section on the knowledge of God in my *ST*.

18. I have discussed the ethical implications of the perspectives especially in chapters 3–4 of *DCL*, and in my short book *Perspectives on the Word of God*.

seek to apply that law to situations (which are themselves revelation of a sort—general revelation) so as to maximize divine blessing, the highest happiness. Existentially, we seek the inner satisfaction of living as God designed us to live, in his presence. These are perspectives. Each involves the others. But each serves as a check and balance against our misunderstandings of the others.

These perspectives are similar to the secular ethical approaches of deontology (normative), teleology-utilitarianism (situational), and subjectivism (existential). But while these secular methods are inconsistent with one another, the three Christian perspectives complement one another. If someone denies the biblical God, he has no reason to think that his norms (deontological), his goals (teleological), and his feelings (subjectivist) will cohere; so he must choose one over the other in case of conflict. But in Christian ethics, the divinely revealed norm fits our situation, because God has defined the norm and made the world to cohere with it. And he has made us in his image to live in the world he has made, under the norms he has determined.

Other Triads

Once you get started thinking this way, threefold distinctions may pop up regularly in your mind. One thinks of the distinction in theology between justification (normative), adoption (situational), and sanctification (existential); the image of God as physical, judicial, and moral (Meredith Kline in *Images of the Spirit*¹⁹); and so forth. In Appendix A of my *DG*, I mention thirty-six of these, some rather tongue-in-cheek, and in *SBL* and *STI* find such triads scattered through the whole corpus of Reformed systematic theology.

And in the exploration of the world, of natural revelation, there are also triads of interest. Vern Poythress's first book, *Philosophy, Science, and the Sovereignty of God*,²⁰ explores how Kenneth Pike's tagmemic linguistics relates to all this, such as the distinction between particle,

19. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980.

20. Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976. See also Poythress's more recent *In the Beginning Was the Word* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), which deals comprehensively with language and its relation to God.

wave, and field. The old philosophical distinction between self, world, and God (*God* here being understood as a divine revelation) is another familiar triad that ties in with our analysis.

Conclusions

How is perspectivalism useful? There are some moments when I think it is a kind of deep structure of the universe and of Bible truth. Other times (most times) I think of it more modestly, as a pedagogical device. Certainly, as a pedagogical device, it gives students some hooks on which to hang bits of theological knowledge—or, to change the metaphor, some string by which to tie things together. But I think it is of even more practical significance.

For one thing, I think it resolves a lot of traditional theological arguments, such as whether redemptive history (the situation) is more important than the divine law (normative) or believing subjectivity. You need each one to appreciate the others. That fact has implications for preaching, evangelism, and our personal appropriation of Scripture.

Second, it encourages us toward balance. Preaching that focuses all the time on law (normative) and not grace (situational) will be corrected by an understanding of the true relation between these, and vice versa. People who emphasize the objective (normative and situational) while disparaging human experience and feelings (existential) can be corrected by a multiperspectival understanding, and vice versa. Perspectivalism is a way of checking ourselves. If a pastor develops a ministry that focuses on norms and situations, he may need to supplement it with something that does justice to the existential perspective, and so on. If a congregation has a lot of prophetic gifts, but few kingly or priestly, perhaps it needs to seek leadership in the other two areas.

So I think that perspectivalism is an encouragement to the unity of the church. *Sometimes* our divisions of theology and practice are differences of perspective, of balance, rather than differences over the essentials of faith.²¹ So perspectivalism will help us better to appreciate one another, and to appreciate the diversity of God's work among us.

21. See my "Machen's Warrior Children," referenced earlier, and *Evangelical Reunion* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), also available at http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_books.htm. See also the essay "Reformed and Evangelicals Together" in the present volume.

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