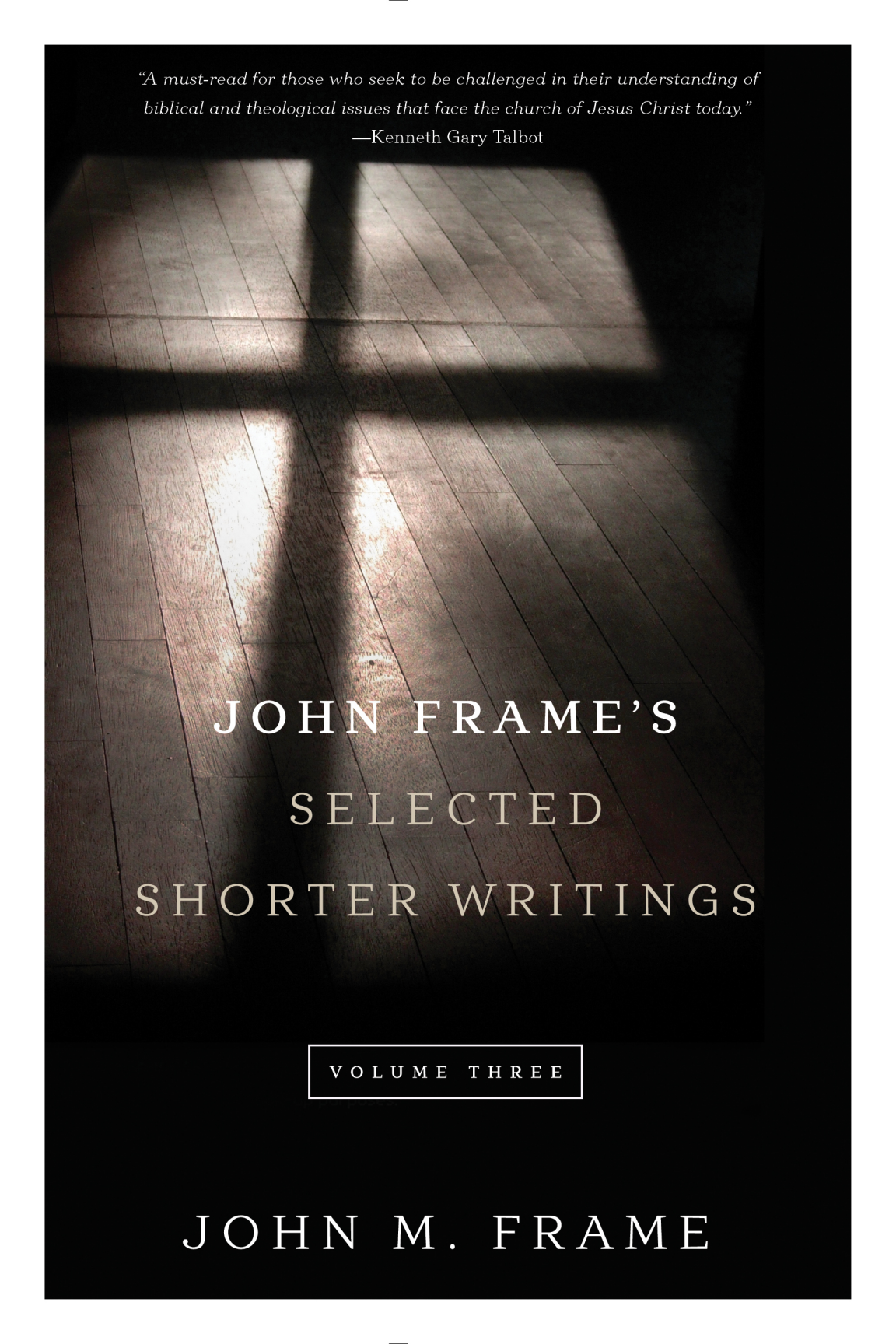


"A must-read for those who seek to be challenged in their understanding of biblical and theological issues that face the church of Jesus Christ today."

—Kenneth Gary Talbot



JOHN FRAME'S
SELECTED
SHORTER WRITINGS

VOLUME THREE

JOHN M. FRAME

“*John Frame’s Selected Shorter Writings, Volume 3* 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

“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* (vol. 3). 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 & CEO, Pathway Learning

“John wrote this book so that the average person could understand it—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

“It seems that divine Providence blesses every generation of Christ’s followers with a few teachers whose influence is enormous. This is certainly true of John Frame. Since he began teaching at Westminster Theological Seminary, his lectures, sermons, and publications have deeply shaped how countless students, pastors, and scholars think about a wide range of subjects. Whether you are a devoted disciple or a staunch opponent, it is impossible to deny the impact that John has had and that he will continue to have in the future. This influence is the result of John’s strong commitment to Scripture over church tradition, his creativity, and his clarity.

“The present volume is not intended to be a systematic presentation of John Frame’s theology. Rather, it is a collection of brief essays spanning theological topics, education, theological method, apologetics, ethics, the church, and a couple of personal reflections. Despite its variety, this collection represents John’s well-known belief that theology is the application of Scripture by persons to life. His definition of theology reflects not only the reality that no theological outlook can be entirely divorced from the life of the theologian, but also the obligation that theologians have to make their outlooks relevant to the lives of Christ’s followers. These essays focus especially on the latter by pointing out concrete ways in which the Scriptures are the only unquestionable rule of faith and life for Christians, no matter what facet of faith and life is in view.

“I still recall when I first met John Frame several decades ago. Despite his accomplishments, he was unassuming and kind then, just as he is today. I recall even more vividly how John personally reached out and encouraged me at a very difficult time in my life. He has been a dear teacher, mentor, and colleague. So I can assure you that the viewpoints

you will find in this volume come from a man who is brilliant by any standard. More importantly, they come from a man who has devoted himself to applying Scripture to his own life and to the lives of others. Not only will this volume inform you, it will give you a model of devotion to Christ that we should all emulate.”

—**Richard L. Pratt Jr.**, Third Millennium Ministries

“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 (conservative complementarianism, seminary exams and degrees, Reformed traditionalism) 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,
Coulterville, 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 anyone who seeks 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

JOHN FRAME'S
SELECTED
SHORTER WRITINGS

VOLUME 3

JOHN M. FRAME



P U B L I S H I N G

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To D. Clair Davis

Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (Phil. 3:8–11)

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Foreword

ONE OF THE BEST blessings of serving as president at RTS Orlando has been getting to know John Frame. Unlike some of my faculty colleagues, I did not study under Frame, nor did I grow up reading Frame. I think the first time I encountered one of his books was late in my Ph.D. program. But I've been trying to catch up ever since coming to RTS! And I can say with thankfulness that reading John Frame's books and getting to interact with him weekly has been a great joy to me. It has deepened my faith and made me wiser.

There are many reasons why one might be intimidated by being in John's presence. For instance, if you stack up on a desk all the books he has written, you will have a pile that is almost as tall as he is! Just to look at their number and length is a reminder that he is one of the most prolific theologians in the world today.

But what I love about John is that he's not only a brilliant professor and prolific author, but also a humble, godly man who loves Christ and has a deep love for his church. I think of him as a gentle giant.

Not that I agree with everything John writes. For one, I am probably more optimistic about the traditional seminary model than John is. Given all the alternatives, I still think it is the best model out there for high-quality theological education and ministry training—especially when it is closely connected to the church. I probably also have a more positive view of accreditation, traditional exams, and high Hebrew and Greek language requirements in seminary. So I am especially grateful that John has given his entire adult life to serve on the faculty of three seminaries and to bless countless seminarians by being there!

Why So Many People Benefit from Reading Frame

There are several reasons why I benefit so much from reading Frame. First of all, John writes clearly. Whether writing about theology, philosophy, or worship, he makes deep and complex truths understandable. You do not get lost in his sentences. This is not just my opinion, but the opinion of many of our students. It's also the verdict of many lay elders I meet around the country. A good number of them have come up to me, in awe because I am "John Frame's boss," and tell me how much they love John's books. His writings are accessible to a wide range of readers.

Second, and more important, I benefit from John's books because he tries to be relentlessly biblical. In that, John challenges me to be a "Bible first" guy. John's instinct is to keep asking: What does the Bible say? As he himself writes, "this is the first and most important question to ask about a subject." And he is right. Why? Because Scripture is God speaking, and as John repeatedly says, "theology is the application of Scripture to our questions." As a theologian, John expounds and applies the Scriptures, but he does so with his unique triperspectival grid, which is both creative and amazingly helpful.

A third reason why I benefit so much from Frame's theological writings is that they have a clear, biblically justified center. In his book *Salvation Belongs to the Lord* and his *Systematic Theology*, he contends that the theme of the entire Bible is the lordship of the triune God. The Bible says many things about God—but that he is Lord, Frame says, is the prominent confession. The word *Lord* is used over seven thousand times in the Bible to refer to God the Father or Jesus Christ. The great fundamental confession of the people of God in the Old Testament in Deuteronomy 6 is that God is Lord. "Jesus is Lord" is the fundamental confession of the New Testament people of God.

Frame also says (as he reminds us in chapter 11) that Scripture typically associates three ideas with lordship: control, authority, and covenant presence. These he calls the lordship attributes. This then becomes the outline of his entire theology.

Which takes me to a fourth reason why I benefit from Frame. I believe that the way John outlines his theology is not only faithful to

Scripture, but eminently practical, and will preach! This is not something that can be easily said about many other theologians and their writings. But it can be said about John Frame.

What do I mean when I say that his theology will preach? Well, this: Think of each of the lordship attributes: control, authority, and covenant presence.

Control is about God's might. That God is in control means that he is sovereign over everything that happens in the whole universe. He works all things after the counsel of his will, says Ephesians 1. He rules the world—the big things and the little things. He is sovereign in creation, providence, and salvation.

Authority is about God's right. As the Lord God, he has the right to be obeyed. He is right and good to tell his creatures what to believe and do. His authority is absolute. We must listen to what he says and do it.

Covenant presence refers to God's commitment to be with us. The essence of God's covenant is: "I will be your God, and you will be my people." So in Christ God binds himself to us. He blesses us, helps us, and is near us.

God is Lord, and this means that he is in control, he is our authority, and he is present with us.

That is not only thoroughly biblical, but eminently useful to me as a Christian today. It means that whatever I am going through, even the hard stuff, I can rest in the fact that he is Lord. He is in control. I need not panic. And it also tells me that no matter how confusing life gets, I must live by his Word in all things. I'm not completely in the dark. It means that whatever challenge is before me today, I can have confidence that God is with me, he is near to call upon, and he will help.

As I said, that will preach. That will counsel. That will sustain and help us through the day. It's just plain good news! I believe John is appreciated by many people because he is the bearer of this news.

Suggestions on How to Read His *Selected Shorter Writings*

In this third volume of *John Frame's Selected Shorter Writings*, we have thirty-four additional articles on topics such as the nature and method of theology, theological issues, epistemology, apologetics, the

church, and ethics, as well as a few of John's sermons and addresses. Some of these were originally published elsewhere and have now been regathered into this volume. Others are published here for the first time.

In reading any of the SSW volumes, do not be afraid to skip around the book and start with a title that particularly interests you. Some of the articles are very short, almost blog-length, but gems all the same. Others are longer—deep pools—instructive and helpful.

If the author is a stranger to you, then I encourage you to go back to volume 1 and read my colleague Steve Childers's wonderful introduction to John Frame. Steve helpfully places John's writings in a wider theological setting. He also offers some great suggestions about which Frame books to read first.

Some Prominent Themes in This Volume

Let me end this foreword by highlighting four prominent themes that stood out as I read this particular volume.

It should not surprise you that a big theme is the priority and truthfulness of the Bible. Divine revelation is the foundation of human thinking and living. Frame's article "Foundations of Biblical Inerrancy" reminds us that God not only speaks, but speaks truthfully. John reviews his own theological method in two articles on biblicalism and reminds us that the Bible, not tradition, is the final rule in Protestantism. He warns of other authorities and approaches to the Bible that subtly shift the center, and he pleads that Scripture remain the ultimate standard for the theologian. Other articles, such as those on law and gospel or the place of Christ in the Old Testament, help us understand how the Bible works.

Another prominent theme in this volume is that we must contend with not one, but two dangers as we try to faithfully follow Christ. The twin dangers are liberalism and traditionalism. Liberalism we are quick to recognize, with its perilous demotion of Scripture and redefinition of major Bible doctrines. It often asserts the primacy or autonomy of reason in matters of religion. Traditionalism (not tradition) is a danger that we less frequently talk about. But Frame does.

He comments on its subtle influence on our theological method, our use of confessions, our understanding of worship, women's roles, and theological education.

Yet another conspicuous theme in volume 3 is John's loving critique of his own Reformed tradition. In earlier volumes, John has described himself as a Reformed evangelical who is Calvinistic, Whitefieldian, and Van Tillian. He treasures the doctrines of God's sovereign grace. He believes that the Reformed tradition has, better than any other, accurately set forth the teaching of Scripture. But John is not afraid to name the weaknesses of his own tradition. In his famous article "Machen's Warrior Children," John recalls the necessary battle against liberalism that J. Gresham Machen and others fought. But then when that battle appeared to be over, some of his followers turned their guns on one another. Frame's article is a kind of field guide of "Reformed land mines," detailing twenty-one "battle issues" that have divided the Reformed camp since the 1930s. He says that he has seen too many churches divided and destroyed by divisive internal battles. John laments the bitter fighting and factionalism of Machen's descendants. But he does so from inside the Reformed family.

Related to this, a final theme that seems prominent in volume 3 is that of truth and love. Yes, truth matters, because God has spoken. But we must learn to speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15). Some theological issues are a matter of life and death, but others are not. Some disagreements are tests of orthodoxy, but not all of them are. Frame says that sometimes love is more important than agreement on such secondary issues. And so he urges Reformed thinkers to present ideas with humility, to treat others with grace and patience, and to become less blind to our own sins and weaknesses. He reminds us that love is also a mark of the church and that love learns to live with a certain amount of disagreement.

Of course, John writes about much more than these four themes. He also writes about worship music, the regulative principle, sanctification, open theism, apologetics, two kingdoms, and on and on. But these four themes stood out to me as I read volume 3. It's what makes this new *SSW* installment unique.

As I said, John writes a lot. Six days a week he is in his office consistently plodding away. I sometimes tell John that he writes books faster than I read books! This thought used to depress me. But now it actually makes me glad, because it means that we will all have John Frame's biblical, accessible, practical wisdom to interact with for many years to come.

Don Sweeting
President and James Woodrow Hassell Professor of Church History
Reformed Theological Seminary
Orlando, Florida

Preface

READERS OF THIS SERIES may be pardoned for thinking that with volume 3 of my *Selected Shorter Writings* I may be digging into the dregs. Actually, however, this volume contains some of my favorite essays. The first two, in particular, established the direction I would take in discussions of theological method, and they set me sharply against the academic-historical type of systematic theology that is most prevalent today. Why I chose not to include those essays in earlier volumes is anybody's guess. There are other essays here of which I am particularly fond, and I will indicate some of the reasons for this fondness in the explanatory notes. All in all, I think that this is the best of the three *SSW* volumes.

Nevertheless, at seventy-five I am winding down my work as a theologian, slouching toward retirement. But before I take leave of this platform, let me express my thanks for the many readers who not only have bought my books, but have said kind things about them. Nothing pleases me more than to hear that my work has been helpful to other Christians—both shepherds and sheep. My thanks also to those who have criticized my ideas. I haven't always responded to you with enthusiasm, but many of you have been gracious and kind in the way you have sought to teach me more excellent ways. Certainly you have influenced me, often in ways below my threshold of consciousness.

A word concerning the dedication of this volume. Clair Davis was never one of my seminary teachers, but I found him at Westminster as a colleague when I returned to teach there in 1968. I left for California in 1980, but soon after that, when e-mail became a standard medium, I got to know Clair as never before. Then I was more and more moved

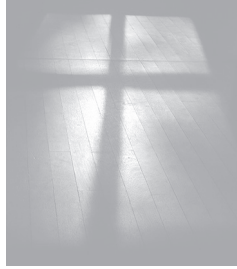
by the quality of his wisdom and by his willingness to share it with the rest of us. I don't know of anyone with a greater passion to know Christ and to make him known.

Thanks also again to John J. Hughes, Karen Magnuson, and P&R Publishing, who have made me look much better than I really am. And more than my thanks: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Cor. 13:14).

Abbreviations

<i>CVT</i>	John M. Frame, <i>Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1995)
<i>CWM</i>	John M. Frame, <i>Contemporary Worship Music: A Biblical Defense</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1997)
<i>DCL</i>	John M. Frame, <i>The Doctrine of the Christian Life</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008)
<i>DG</i>	John M. Frame, <i>The Doctrine of God</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002)
<i>DKG</i>	John M. Frame, <i>The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987)
<i>DWG</i>	John M. Frame, <i>The Doctrine of the Word of God</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010)
<i>ER</i>	John M. Frame, <i>Evangelical Reunion: Denominations and the One Body of Christ</i> (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991)
<i>ESV</i>	English Standard Version
<i>HWPT</i>	John M. Frame, <i>History of Western Philosophy and Theology</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015)
<i>KJV</i>	King James Version
<i>NIV</i>	New International Version
<i>NKJV</i>	New King James Version
<i>NT</i>	New Testament
<i>OT</i>	Old Testament
<i>SSW₁</i>	John M. Frame, <i>John Frame's Selected Shorter Writings, Volume 1</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2014)

SSW ₂	John M. Frame, <i>John Frame's Selected Shorter Writings, Volume 2</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015)
WCF	Westminster Confession of Faith
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

Nature and Method of Theology

1

Muller on Theology

Richard A. Muller, The Study of Theology: From Biblical Interpretation to Contemporary Formulation, Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation 7 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991). Originally published in WTJ 56, 1 (Spring 1994): 438–42. Used by permission.

Note, 2014: As I mentioned in the preface, I value this review article in a special way, since it set forth clearly for the first time how my concept of theological method differs from the academic-historical approach advocated by Muller and by most theologians writing today. I had hoped to open a dialogue on the subject, but that never happened. Muller's reply to me in WTJ was fairly hostile and in my judgment was an exercise in name-calling. There was better interaction in response to my "In Defense of Something Close to Biblicism," chapter 2 in this volume. But I do want to make it clear here that I have great respect for Muller's achievements in the history of doctrine, despite our disagreements in formulating the concept of theology.

Richard Muller is certainly one of the most impressive scholars writing today in the fields of history of doctrine and systematic theology. Therefore, news that he has addressed the question of theological method properly arouses our expectations. In some respects, this book

did not disappoint me: it is learned and erudite, it provides a useful compendium of much ancient and recent wisdom on the subject, and there is very little in it with which I literally disagree. On the whole, however, I found the book deeply unsatisfactory, for reasons that will appear later.

The book is important both in its achievements and in its shortcomings. Positively, it formulates, more concisely and clearly than ever before, the thinking that underlies much (possibly most) evangelical and Reformed theology in our time, a pattern of thinking that is arguably very different from the dominant pattern fifty years ago. Negatively, the book's weaknesses reveal potentially fatal flaws in that theological mentality and therefore raise hard questions that every contemporary Reformed or evangelical theologian must ask.

But first, we must see what Muller wants to tell us. He begins by posing the much-discussed question of the relation of theory to practice in preparation for the ministry. As a foil, he presents the extreme view of one unnamed recent D.Min. graduate (I will call him *Elmer*, for I want to refer to him from time to time) who scorned all theoretical, academic study, and who complimented his D.Min. program because it required “no theological speculation, no ivory-tower critical thinking, no retreat from the nitty-gritty of daily ministry” (p. vii). In contrast, Muller notes his own seven-year experience in the pastorate, in which “everything I had learned both in seminary and in graduate school had been of use to me in my ministry” (p. viii). How, then, can we show that the traditional academic disciplines really are relevant to the pastoral ministry? Or should we simply abandon those disciplines, as Elmer would prefer?

Muller thinks we can best answer these questions by carefully reviewing the nature of the traditional fourfold theological curriculum: biblical, historical, systematic, and practical theology. Like E. D. Hirsch, Allan Bloom, and others in the field of general education, Muller advocates in theological education a renewed appreciation of traditional models and content, not only to create a better-informed clergy, but also as a means of forming character (pp. xiii–xiv).

Elmer might be rather scandalized at the suggestion that academic theological study builds character. We will have to follow the argument;

but first, more questions. Muller points out that the traditional curriculum is also under stress in our time because of the proliferation of subdisciplines and because of wide differences (especially since the Enlightenment) about history, hermeneutics, and method as well as doctrine. Those problems, too, are on his agenda.

Some potential solutions exist in recent volumes on theology written by Gerhard Ebeling, Edward Farley, and Wolfhart Pannenberg. Ebeling, according to Muller, sacrifices the unity of theology because of his unwillingness to exclude options that he deems to be open questions in the present discussion (p. 45). Farley finds the unity of theology only in the student, and the goal of theology not in the impartation of a definite content, but in the “shaping of human beings under an ideal” (p. 50). Pannenberg, however, reminds us of the importance of objective historical content and scientific method. Muller’s response to these positions is to seek a balance between objective study and subjective character formation, without sacrificing the unity of the discipline (pp. 40–41, 60). We will see that his theological method is, as we might expect from his past writings, strongly influenced by the method of historical study. It is this kind of careful study, he believes, that generates the best in contemporary theological formulation and pastoral character.¹

Muller analyzes in turn the four major theological disciplines in order to show the path “from biblical interpretation to contemporary formulation” (to cite his subtitle). In biblical studies (where he considers himself only a “dabbler at best” [p. xvii]), he emphasizes the importance of reading the text in its original setting, “to place us as readers of the text into the milieu of its authors” (p. 68). This principle forbids us, for example, to assume that the *monogenēs* of John 1:14, 18 “stands as a direct reference” to inter-Trinitarian relationships, or to read “image of God” in Genesis 1:27 as a reference to Christ or to human virtues (p. 66), at least in the “basic interpretation” or “primary exegetical reading”

1. I advise the reader to look first at the appendix (pp. 41–60), which analyzes the books of Ebeling, Farley, and Pannenberg, and only after that to read the main body of chapter 1 (pp. 19–41). That way, one can make more sense out of the references to the three theologians in the main body of the chapter. If Muller were to rewrite the book, I would suggest to him that the material in the appendix be integrated with the main body of the chapter, toward the beginning.

(p. 74) of the text. It is also wrong, he says, to read Psalm 2:7 “in terms of an inter-Trinitarian begetting or even in terms of the New Testament application of the text to Christ (Heb. 1:5) if done at a primary level of interpretation” (p. 66).² Such interpretations would not, he says, have occurred to the original authors or readers, and therefore they are not historically responsible. Further, such interpretations fail to allow the Scriptures to speak for themselves, to rule over our dogmatic formulations (p. 81).

Therefore, if we want a right understanding of the NT, we must read the OT “separately” (p. 71), not as if it were “interpretatively subordinate in all its statements to the New Testament” (p. 73). Indeed, it must be studied “critically as a pre-Christian and, therefore, to a certain extent non-Christian body of literature” (ibid.). Nor should the NT be “understood as the second of two books that God once wrote.” Rather, it should be understood as part of an “unbroken stream of writings extending from the Old Testament through the so-called intertestamental period, and followed historically by an unbroken stream of writings extending from the last book of the New Testament down to the present” (p. 79). Muller does affirm the canonical status of our Bible, distinct in that respect from the rest of the “unbroken stream” of writings (pp. 81–82). But that status is justified by objective historical analysis of the entire stream.

Biblical theology as such considers “the unity and larger implication” of the biblical materials and thus “joins biblical study to the other theological disciplines” (p. 85). Over against systematic theology, it addresses “the religion of the Bible on its own terms” (p. 86), “free from the encumbrances of later dogmatic language” (p. 92). Such study can “point critically and constructively toward contemporary systematic and practical theology *precisely because* it is constructed biblically and historically without reference to the structures of churchly dogmatics” (pp. 94–95).

Church history and history of doctrine also, in Muller’s view, should be seen as in some sense independent of dogmatics: “at least

2. For some other examples, see pages 132ff., 190ff.

for our times, the historical investigation must precede the doctrinal statement and in fact supply the information from which the doctrinal statement takes its shape and on which it rests” (p. 99). His example: It is

doctrinally arguable to attribute the accurate preservation of the text of Scripture to divine providence Historical investigation cannot, however, rest content with the doctrinal explanation but must look to the process of the transmission of the text and examine the techniques and procedures of the Masoretes, the monastic calligraphers of the church, and the scholarly editors of later centuries, and find in the actual practice of these people the historical grounds for arguing whether or not the text has been accurately preserved. (Ibid.)

The historian of doctrine is not to “evaluate in any ultimate sense the rightness or wrongness of Arius’ views” (p. 99). “A dogmatic reading of the materials that assumes the rightness of Nicea on the basis of some contemporary orthodoxy will entirely miss the full significance of the council” (p. 100). Some of the church fathers, ignoring this rule, produced “incredibly theologically biased interpretations” (p. 102), such as the triumphalism of Eusebius of Caesarea and Augustine’s identification of the institutional church with the “city of God.” Objective historical study corrects such bias.

Objective history also helps us to see the differences between biblical content and later formulations. Presbyterian church government, says Muller, owes more to the structure of Swiss cantons than to the NT, from which little of a definitive nature can be gathered on that subject (p. 104). And the formulations of Anselm and the Reformers concerning the atonement owe much to the doctrinal concerns of the later church. Though substitutionary atonement is “firmly rooted in Scripture,” there are other “equally biblical” views (“ransom from bondage to the powers of the world,” “the free gift of reconciling love through the loving example of Christ”). The Protestant churches adopted the penal substitutionary view because it was “a perfect corollary of the doctrine of justification through faith alone” (p. 107). Thus we learn how doctrines are formulated, and we learn how to participate in the process. Character is developed

as we understand and come to join the unfinished task, as we come to understand our “roots” (pp. 107–8).

Such historical study extends to the history of religions. Although specialists in the history of religions tend to relativize the claims of Christianity, the discipline can perform useful service for Christian theology. For instance, the triumph of Christianity in the ancient world can be better understood once we understand the mystery religions and other rivals that Christianity had to overcome (pp. 115ff.).

Systematic theology is “the broadest usage for the contemporary task of gathering together the elements of our faith into a coherent whole” (p. 124). It is “oriented to the question of contemporary validity,” and therefore must consider philosophical and apologetic issues (p. 125). Dogmatic theology is a subdivision of systematics, which is “the contemporary exposition of the great doctrines of the church” (p. 127). Again, Muller emphasizes the unilateral priority of biblical and historical theology to systematics: the latter “is a result, not a premise of the other disciplines” (p. 129). Nevertheless, there is a “churchly hermeneutical circle” (*ibid.*) that finds “closure” in dogmatics and therefore “returns, via the tradition, to the text and provides a set of theological boundary-concepts for the continuing work of theology” (p. 130). Nevertheless, we must not use a doctrinal construction as “a key” to Scripture so that “the scriptural Word becomes stifled by a human *a priori*” (*ibid.*). In this connection he takes to task the many “centrisms” of theology: Barth’s Christomonism, the modernists’ use of “God is love” to the exclusion of other divine attributes, and so forth.

Philosophy is useful to the work of systematic theology. “Philosophical theology can be defined as the philosophical discussion of topics held in common by theology and philosophy” (p. 138). This discipline, “in order to be true to itself, must not utilize Scripture or churchly standards of truth: it rests on the truths of logic and reason—and occupies the ground of what has typically been called ‘natural theology’” (p. 139).³ Nevertheless, philosophical theology, “so long as it stands within the

3. Compare page 140: “philosophical theology . . . is the only one of the subdisciplines grouped together as ‘systematic theology’ the structure of which is determined by a nontheological discipline.”

circle of the theological encyclopedia, must be a Christian discipline, no matter how philosophically determined its contents” (p. 141). Christian without Christian “standards of truth”? Yes, in the sense that it is limited to topics of concern to Christian theology.

Philosophy of religion is distinct from philosophical theology, though there is overlap. Philosophical theology “provides a logical and rational check on dogmatic formulation. Philosophy of religion, by way of contrast, considers the nature of religion itself a focus that it shares with the phenomenology of religion” (p. 139).⁴

Ethics is “the translation of the materials of Christian teaching . . . into the contemporary life situation of the community of belief, first as principles and then as enactments” (p. 147). As such, Muller thinks, it is distinct from doctrinal theology (p. 146).

In his discussion of apologetics, he recognizes with the presuppositional school that that discipline “rests on the presupposition of faith or belief,”⁵ while “its actual content must be dictated as much by the circumstances of the argument as by the content of the message.” And as it rests on faith, it in turn influences theological formulation (p. 151).

As we might expect, Muller’s interest in practical theology is mainly to emphasize its theological character. While it is not the case that theory “absolutely precedes practice” (p. 156), nevertheless practical theology must refer back to theological truths. Unlike secular psychology, for example, pastoral counseling must ask about the “soul” (p. 158).

Contemporary formulations of theology, then, must be aware of the whole sweep of history from the biblical period down to the present. His example here is the distinction between natural and supernatural (particularly natural and supernatural revelation). Comparative religion shows that in many faiths God is manifested everywhere, not merely in supernatural interventions (pp. 166–67). The progress of science also indicates the futility of limiting God’s activity to the miraculous,

4. I suspect that in this quote, there should be a comma or colon following *itself*. I have quoted it as it is in the book.

5. Compare his later comment, “there is no question that the ‘presuppositional’ approach to theology carries the day against a purely ‘evidential’ approach” (p. 213). While there are rational proofs and evidences, “the rational proofs and the historical or empirical evidences are seldom if ever the reason for belief” (p. 214).

for many things that once seemed miraculous can be given natural explanations (pp. 167–68). We can nevertheless distinguish “between an original, generalized revelation of the divine, grounded in the divine presence in and through all things, and a subsequent, special and gracious revelation of the divine, specific to a single religion, distinguishing it from all others, and understood as the completion and fulfillment of the original revelation, in and for a particular community of belief” (p. 169). Thus, we can recognize truth in all religions without sacrificing the distinctiveness of the Christian gospel.

The fourth and final chapter of the book deals with “The Unity of Theological Discourse.” There is unity, first, between “objectivity and subjectivity.” Here Muller points out that “theology has never been a purely academic discipline” (p. 174). The major theologians have always been active in the work of the church. The very looseness with which they sometimes cite Scripture indicates that they are less interested in academic precision than in *using* the text practically (pp. 176–77). Further, the enormous difficulties involved in defining theology as a “science”⁶ suggest that we should pay closer attention to the “subjective side of theology” that “arises in an individual in community” and note “that the ongoing historical life of the community is necessary to the mediation of objective statements of doctrine, as significant statements, to individuals” (pp. 183–84). Muller emphasizes that “theology arises and becomes significant in this corporate context of belief and interpretation” (p. 184). This emphasis on subjectivity need not compromise the scientific character of theology, for science in general “has long since set aside the illusion of ‘detached objectivity’ in scientific inquiry.” Indeed, “there is arguably a prejudgment concerning significance in the initial identification and selection of data.” There are no “brute facts” (p. 185).

This discussion of the interpenetration of objectivity and subjectivity prepares us for a more extended treatment of “hermeneutical circles.” Circularity exists between subject and object, and between whole and part. We should come to an individual Scripture passage with an understanding of the whole, specifically of the “genre” of the book to which it belongs

6. His critique of Hodge here on pages 179–81 parallels my own in some respects. See *DKG*, 77–81.

(pp. 188–89). Further, we must bring to exegesis all our understanding of the book’s linguistic, historical, cultural, and social context (p. 190), and the “restraints” of “source, form, redaction, rhetorical, and canon criticism,” recognizing, of course, that “each of these critical approaches supplements the others and provides some checks on them” (p. 194). And despite its perils, there is no way to escape an element of “personal involvement” that influences our use of a text (p. 196).

Muller notes that although at an earlier point, in considering the Johannine prologue, he rejected the assumption “of the Nicene language as a presupposition to interpretation,” nevertheless, there are historical reasons why this passage played a significant role in the later Trinitarian discussion, not the least “that logos-language was crucial to the contextualization of the gospel in the second century” (p. 200). That historical development “becomes an important element in the subsequent interpretative work of understanding the text in our present context” (p. 201). So the Nicene Trinitarian doctrine does after all, in some ways, properly influence our understanding of John 1.

Thus, the interpretive “whole” includes “contextualization,” bringing the Christian message to bear on the various cultural situations of the present day. Contextualization has always occurred, but in recent times it has, for historical reasons, been done with greater self-consciousness. Again, Muller refers to “atonement theory” for examples. The various “approaches to atonement” in the NT are “not to be viewed as mutually exclusive, nor are they to be viewed as easily harmonizable into a single theory” (p. 205). The theorizing of Irenaeus, Anselm, and others represents contextualizations understandable in the light of their historical situations. Contextualization is “the completion of the hermeneutical circle in our own persons and in the context of present-day existence” (p. 211).

The book concludes with an “epilogue” describing the beneficial effects of theological study on human character. Such education is “spiritually uplifting”; it inculcates “wisdom concerning human nature,” “a way of life as well as a pattern of thought” (p. 215). The study of theology communicates “values—values to be believed and values to be acted upon” (p. 216). Further, study of the doctrinal materials of the church reveals “the

cultural and social relativity of the documents,” which serves “to press us toward our own statement of these corporately held values, insofar as we recognize both the limitation of the particular cultural form and the ultimacy of the values expressed under it” (p. 217).

Elmer must learn that his anti-intellectualism is counterproductive in the church’s effort to proclaim the truth relevantly and practically. Facile invocations of the supposed absolute contrasts between “Hebrew and Greek thought” and between “heart and head” in opposition to academic learning are untenable (p. 217). A pastor must be “a bearer of culture,” not merely, as Elmer sought to be, a “technician or operations manager.” Otherwise, his people will be “spiritually impoverished” (p. 219).

In book reviews, I do not usually exposit a text in such detail, but in view of the importance of the book, and in view of the nature of my criticisms, I wanted the reader in this case to hear Muller, as much as possible, in his own words. Muller seeks to achieve some very delicate balances of emphasis, which need to be heard. In view of those delicate balances, it is indeed possible that my criticism will misread him. In fact, I think that any critic will find this book a minefield (as well as a treasure field!). As I read, I found that most of the criticisms that occurred to me were answered, at least in passing, at some point in the book. I suspect that critics who attack this book in a superficial way will often experience backfire, the critique reflecting unfavorably on the critic.

With this caveat I must, nevertheless, proceed to evaluation. I will first reiterate that in many ways this is a fine book, and one can learn from it a great deal about the history and method of theology. Doubtless there is much here, too, that will encourage those who are swimming against the tide of modern culture, trying to maintain the traditional disciplines of theological learning. Yet I find the book to be confused, or at least confusing, in three important areas represented by the following distinctions: priority/circularity, description/normativity, and theory/practice.

Priority and Circularity

I must say that until my reading reached about page 127, I was fully prepared to give Muller an introductory lecture on hermeneutical

circularity. Until that point, his entire emphasis is on the unilateral priority of one discipline over another. There is the unilateral priority of synchronic exegesis over diachronic: we must not read inter-Trinitarian relationships into Psalm 2, or Christ into Genesis 1:27, because exegesis must restrict itself to what would have occurred to the original readers. Indeed, the OT must be read as a “pre-Christian” or even “non-Christian” text (p. 73). And there is the unilateral priority of biblical theology to systematics: biblical theology must never be encumbered with dogmatic language (p. 92). We must not find Trinitarian distinctions in John 1, any more than in Psalm 2. And there is the priority of historical theology to dogmatics: church history must not proceed with doctrinal preconceptions; it may not even evaluate the rightness or wrongness of the theological views it describes (p. 99). Systematics is a result, not a premise, of the other disciplines (p. 129). Even philosophical theology has a unilateral priority over systematics in one respect: it “must not utilize Scripture or churchly standards of truth: it rests on the truths of logic and reason” (p. 139).⁷ Certainly there is some truth in these statements: most theologians can supply additional examples of exegesis distorted by the “reading in” of later dogmatic concepts, or of truth being stifled by the imposition of a “human a priori.” But is it not going a bit far to say that the OT must be read as a “pre-Christian” or “non-Christian” book? Perhaps Muller understands the connotations of these phrases differently from the way I do, but I find them entirely inappropriate. Are we to say that the early Christians, and the early church, misread the OT when they claimed that it testified of Christ? Was Athanasius wrong about John 1? Was Calvin wrong about substitutionary atonement? Must philosophical theology really be religiously neutral?

These, of course, are only preliminary criticisms. For we must immediately note Muller’s attempts at balance. For one thing, the priorities above are guarded by some rather vague qualifications. The *monogenēs* of John 1 does not stand “as a direct reference” to inter-Trinitarian relationships (p. 66). Well, might it possibly stand as an *indirect* reference? And what, precisely, is the difference between a direct and an

7. He also says that philosophical theology is a “Christian discipline,” but only (so far as I can determine in context) in the limitation of its subject matter to Christian concerns.

indirect reference? We suspect that this distinction is important, for through some such distinction we may be able to account for the church's traditional Christological use of the text. But Muller doesn't explain it. Similarly, Genesis 1:27 does not refer to Christ or to human virtues as its "basic interpretation" or on a "primary exegetical reading." Well, what about nonbasic interpretations, or secondary exegetical readings? And what are those, pray tell? Or what about the implicit distinction between "primary" and "secondary" "levels of interpretation" on page 66? And if the OT may not be "interpretatively subordinate in all its statements to the New Testament," may it, perhaps, be "interpretatively subordinate" in *some* of its statements?

But of course, Muller does, from about page 127 on,⁸ bring the concept of a hermeneutical circle to central prominence. Indeed, he does say that once hermeneutics issues in dogmatic formulations, it "returns, via the tradition, to the text and provides a set of theological boundary-concepts for the continuing work of theology" (p. 130). We may, for example, at some level in our exegesis, make use of the fact that the Johannine prologue led to Nicea through various historical circumstances (p. 201). To use one of Muller's favorite terms, there is a historical "trajectory"⁹ linking John to Nicea.

But that is still awfully vague. Just how is this fact to be used in exegesis, without violating Muller's earlier strictures? We have a fairly clear idea what is to be done at level one, but what of level two? This is tremendously important, for preaching and theological writing are generally not level-one enterprises. Historically (and this begins in the NT), the church has preached Christ from OT texts and has defended its dogmatic statements from both Testaments. Muller doesn't seem to want to say that this was all a mistake. But if it is not a mistake, how is

8. There are a few earlier hints (see pages xvi–xvii, 33, and 61, where he emphasizes that the four theological disciplines are interdependent, not neatly separable), but most of his detailed discussion belies this claim; systematics, for example, seems to be dependent on exegesis, but not at all the reverse.

9. Cf. pp. 62, 79, 82, 85, 96, 108. Another favorite Muller term is *supersede*, which is consistently misspelled in the volume: pp. 27, 28, 42, 63, 118, 147. I suggest that if neither Richard Muller nor Zondervan's editors can spell the term correctly, we should simply give up and agree among ourselves to spell it with a *c* from now on. That point, of course, is not central to the argument of this review.

it to be justified, and how is it to be done? If Muller's approach provides us with no way to do this, and if through that failure it in effect calls such preaching and teaching into question, perhaps we will have to conclude that not the church's practice, but Muller's metatheology is flawed at a fundamental level.

One might try to find an answer in Muller's concept of the circular relation between "whole and part": since the OT is part of a larger whole, the Christian canon, we may legitimately read Psalm 2 Christologically. But that is to misconstrue Muller's position. His concept of "whole" does not seem to be applied to the canon as a totality. He coordinates "whole" with "genre" (pp. 188–89), and of course, the entire canon doesn't fit into any particular genre. His "wholes" would seem to be particular books of the Bible, or at most groups of books with common genre. Nor does it seem that we can relate John 1 to the Nicene Trinitarianism by any kind of whole-part relation.

Or is the circularity between "object and subject" more relevant to our question? On that basis we might say that the interpreter, who is himself a believer in the Trinity, cannot, finally, forget that belief when he is exegeting Psalm 2. Nor can he forget that the NT itself reads Psalm 2 Christologically. Thus, he is constrained to find an interpretation of Psalm 2 consistent with that NT usage. I would accept that justification for Christological exegesis of the OT; but I cannot imagine that Muller would, after all he has said against that sort of procedure. Similarly with John 1.

What Muller seems to have in mind in the case of John 1 (although here I am especially unsure that I am rightly interpreting him; I am somewhat reading between the lines, expanding his "hints") is something like this (cf. pp. 200–201): John 1 refers only to Jesus' filial consciousness in relation to God as Father and has no Trinitarian implication. But the second-century apologists used the *logos* terminology to account for universal divine revelation, and they needed then to make a distinction between God immanent and God transcendent, God in himself and God in his revelation. Thus, we have a God who is one, yet diverse in some way. Since *logos* is identified with Christ in John 1, it was natural for Christ's relationship with the Father to be understood in this pattern.

Thus, the text was read as teaching the Nicene Trinitarian relationships. We cannot really turn back the clock by reversing the church's decision, so we should simply accept the Nicene episode as part of our own history and try to build on it.

Now, certainly, the church did use *logos*, as Muller says, and his explanation for the prominence of this text in Trinitarian theology is plausible. But was the church *right*? That is a very important question. I think it was, because I disagree with Muller's "first level" exegesis. John 1 makes an equation between God, the creative Word of Genesis 1, and Jesus Christ, and also distinguishes God from the Word. The church's Trinitarian use of the passage was not only justifiable in the light of historical circumstances; it was *right*. What is Muller's verdict? Perhaps he will feel that I am asking the wrong question, but I honestly think my question is the most important one that can be asked at this point. Was it *right*? From what I can make of Muller's analysis, he would have to say, respectfully, that it was wrong, though what it did was somehow historically justifiable. Should we continue to honor its mistake simply to avoid trying to "turn back the clock"? Muller seems to say yes. But the Reformers became famous for correcting mistakes made by earlier theologians; can we do less? It does seem to me that the logic of Muller's view, adding a bit of the Reformers' zeal for truth, is that we should abandon the use of John 1 to prove the doctrine of the Trinity, if indeed we are to maintain the doctrine of the Trinity at all. And if I am confused, I believe it is Muller who has confused me.

I prefer a method that is more self-consciously circular. Certainly the possible legitimate uses¹⁰ of Psalm 2 and John 1 were not all known to the original authors, and of course, it is a useful exercise to ask how the original authors might have explained the passages. But they were known to the divine author (about which more must be said later). And what the human authors wrote had legitimate implications, interpretations, applications beyond what they were able to grasp. Those applications fully justified the uses of those texts by later biblical writers and by the ecumenical councils. The goal of exegesis is to find not how the original

10. Here the correlation of *meaning* and *use* or *application* becomes useful; see my *DKG*, 81–85, 93–100.

authors would have expounded their writings, but rather the applications that are justified by the texts. When exegesis observes that norm, it is saved both from eisegesis and from triviality.

In other ways, too, Muller seems to be unclear on the implications of hermeneutical circularity. His statement that philosophical theology “must not utilize Scripture or churchly standards of truth: it rests on the truths of logic and reason” (p. 139) is horrendous. I am amazed that such an intelligent writer can pen such a sentence while endorsing presuppositional apologetics! The whole point of presuppositional apologetics, a biblical point in my view, is that in *all* areas of life we must “utilize Scripture [and] churchly standards of truth.” There are no other legitimate standards. Nor is there any legitimate use of “logic and reason” that is not itself subject to scriptural standards of rationality.

Indeed, this statement (together with Muller’s general approach to “first level exegesis”) is inconsistent with his emphasis on page 185 that there is no “detached objectivity” or “brute facts.” But so far as I can tell, Muller is not even a little bit aware of the tension (to say the least) in his book between unilateral priorities and hermeneutical circularity. I confess that I can only express bafflement.

Description and Normativity

David Hume taught that you cannot deduce *ought* from *is*. Now, in a Christian epistemology, the matter is not quite that simple. The very fact of God’s existence is a normative (as well as a descriptive) fact. The fact that God commands something implies that those addressed are obliged to carry out that command. The reason is that God, simply because he is God, is worthy of all obedience. And since God reveals himself in creation as well as Scripture, one may gain normative (Rom. 1:32) as well as descriptive data from the creation.

That having been said, it is nevertheless important for the theologian to account for the normative force of his teachings. It certainly cannot be assumed, for example, that a description of various historical events or views will yield normative conclusions. We cannot decide our theology by counting noses among the Puritans, or the Reformers, or the nineteenth-century American Presbyterians, or some other favored

group. Nor can we assume that because some view has been endorsed by a church council or has otherwise gained a following among Christians, we have an obligation to agree with it. *Sola Scriptura* means that the only ultimate norm for theology is the teaching of Scripture. Other norms must justify themselves by their faithfulness to the inspired Word.

Theologians such as Muller who put a heavy emphasis on historical method run the risk of jumping from description to norm without adequate justification. When reading G. C. Berkouwer, I have often found myself lost among the citations and historical comparisons, wondering exactly what he is recommending as normative content and why. We have already seen this problem in Muller, for the question of circularity in theological method is ultimately the question of authority, of norm. The ultimate presupposition of the Christian interpreter, as he enters the hermeneutical circle, is the presupposition of God's revealed norms. But if that presupposition is compromised by supposed norms that are not themselves given by divine revelation—Muller's "logic and reason," for instance—then the relation of description to norm becomes confused. As we have seen, for example, Muller refuses or neglects to ask the important normative question: whether the early church was *right* in its Trinitarian exegesis.

Muller seems at least to assimilate the whole work of theology to a historical-descriptive model. His "first level" exegesis is essentially a work of historical investigation. Studying the NT is a study of that "unbroken stream of writings extending from the Old Testament through the so-called intertestamental period, and followed historically by an unbroken stream of writings . . . down to the present" (p. 79). It requires study of the culture of the times, the different religious groupings that competed with Christianity, the various tendencies in the early church, and so on. This study essentially continues the "historical model introduced in our discussion of the Old Testament" (*ibid.*).

Now, Muller does not ignore the fact that the canon is unique and authoritative. This is one example of the "delicate balance" of the book. He notes that "these historical issues and the problems they raise for interpretation stand in a constant tension with the doctrinally and dogmatically precise canon of the New Testament in which

we have the closest and clearest witness to Jesus Christ as Savior and Redeemer” (p. 81). But how is this “tension” to be resolved? The answer seems to be through reiteration of the historical model. It is “historical understanding” that, though it does not “give us the canon of the New Testament,” nevertheless “does offer a basis for grasping first historically and then theologically the significance of the canon” (p. 82). Remember his principle that “without historical and critical understanding, the tendency to overlook differences of approach [among the Synoptics] and to find a theological common denominator—typical of later orthodox Dogmatics—becomes all too easily the norm for interpretation, and the New Testament can no longer critique our theology” (ibid.).

Historical study is the “first level” of exegesis, and everything else (I assume, without consideration of the hermeneutical circle, for Muller tends to emphasize unilateral priority in such contexts) must be based on that. So we begin by a historiography that is religiously *neutral* (this is not his term, but I do not see how we can avoid using it as the clearest way to characterize his view), not based on Christian presuppositions. On that basis, we establish the significance of the canon. Then we can make theological use of it. But why should we assume that this objective, neutral historiography is normative? Why should that be the bedrock on which we must build our exegesis and theology, indeed on which Scripture itself, as canon, is built?

Muller does affirm the unique authority of Scripture. I state this point with some vagueness, as he does. Whether he would affirm *inerrancy* in some sense, I do not know. He tends to take the issue of biblical authority rather casually—far too much so in view of its intrinsic importance and in view of the present theological climate. He says rather flippantly concerning the NT, “Nor can it be understood as the second of two books that God once wrote” (p. 79). I will assume in charity that addition of the word *merely* to this sentence would better reflect his thought.¹¹

11. The same casual attitude toward Christian doctrine is reflected in Muller’s treatment of divine providence on pages 99 and 117–18. Yes, he says in effect, divine providence does guide history, but the historian wants to know the specific natural causes of events. I do not doubt that historians want and need to know the latter, but I do not think we should use this consideration to virtually make providence a historical irrelevancy. But Muller has nothing

In response to Farley, who rejects the traditional fourfold curriculum on the ground that it presupposes biblical inspiration, Muller says that “we do not have to invoke classic orthodox doctrines like the inspiration, infallibility, and divine authority of Scripture at this point: in the context of the question, such doctrines do not amount to proofs in any case” (p. 97). Rather, all we need is to point out that the books of the canon have a “qualitatively different effect” on the Christian community than do noncanonical documents. Well, maybe so. But should not something more be said, lest the reader gain the impression that these doctrines are entirely inconsequential?

Muller does invoke the Scripture principle of the Reformation—without notable enthusiasm (pp. 131, 172; but cf. p. vii)—and he does, as we have seen, present his history-oriented methodology as a means of allowing Scripture (so interpreted) to “rule” our theology. On the other hand, he recommends source, form, redaction, rhetorical, and canon criticism (p. 194) without any critique of how these disciplines are commonly practiced today. His discussions of Farley, Ebeling, and Pannenberg, too, reflect no sense at all of Kuyperian *antithesis*. He never even hints in the direction of the great gulf that Machen and Van Til found between the orthodox Reformed faith and the dominant forces in modern theology. He makes it plain that although he may differ with modern theologians in this or that detail or emphasis, he is essentially playing the same game that they are.

It is hard to sort all of this out, amid Muller’s careful balancing of motifs. But the sum of it seems to be something like this: Yes, Scripture is uniquely normative, but that really does not make much difference to the concrete work of theology. Scriptural authority is our dogmatic confession, but we must not allow it to interfere with the purely historical work of theological understanding and formulation. That norm must, in any case, be discovered and justified by neutral, objective history. Therefore, that neutral historical method is our actual *working* norm.

If this is indeed his view, and I find nothing in the book to contradict it, then I must say that I think it seriously wrong. “Neutral,

positive and specific to say about providence as a factor with which the historian must deal in his work.

objective history” is a totally illegitimate notion within the context of a Christian epistemology. Thus, it certainly is not the basis of biblical authority. Scripture is authoritative because it is inspired by God. On page 186, Muller mentions inspiration as the source of biblical authority, but characteristically rather shrugs it off:

The reason that Scripture is authoritative—apart from our traditional doctrinal statements concerning its divine inspiration and its authority as a doctrinal norm—is that its contents are mirrored in the life of the church and that, in this historical process of reflection, the believing community has gradually identified as canon the books that rightly guide and reflect its faith while setting aside those books that fail to reflect its faith adequately.

That seems to be his regular stance toward matters of biblical inspiration and authority: yes, fine; but other things are more important for theological method. Nowhere in the book does he suggest that the inspiration of Scripture, its uniquely divine authorship, has any implications at all for the work of theology.

Again, I am appalled. The inspiration of Scripture is not an incidental matter, nor is it a mere confessional datum that we can set aside in the practical work of theological formulation. If indeed we have a divinely inspired Bible, then that is a fact of overwhelming importance for theology as for every other area of life. It is more important than any other fact that Muller brings to bear on the work of theology. That fact implies that we cannot exegete Scripture in the same way in which we exegete other texts (even when the general rules of exegesis have been reformed by the Word). Not only the intention of the human author, but (especially!) the intention of the divine author must guide our interpretation.¹² And our concepts of history, culture, logic, reason, and critical thought must all be reconsidered in the light of scriptural teachings. With sadness, I must say that there is not a trace of this emphasis in Muller’s book.

12. My friend and colleague Vern Poythress is working on a manuscript called *The Supremacy of Christ in Interpretation* that contains wonderful insight along this line. Christian exegetes should await its publication with great eagerness. [Note, 2014: This was published as *God-Centered Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1999).]

And as to his use of Ebeling and others, let me say that I can sympathize with evangelical theologians who do not want to be marginalized, who do not want to be stigmatized as “fundamentalists” and therefore excluded from the mainstream of modern theological discussion. In charity, I will credit them with the motive of wanting to be “salt and light,” not of coveting “academic respectability” for its own sake. Nor do I think that we have to disagree with every sentence that Ebeling, for example, writes. On the other hand, although the lines seem fuzzier today than when Machen and Van Til wrote, their critique is far from irrelevant to the theologians of the 1990s. There is still an enormous difference between theologians who submit their reasoning to the Word of God and so-called theologians (however prominent) who do the reverse. It may be that to bear the offense of the cross today, Bible-believing theologians will have to accept marginalization as part of the (relatively small in our day) cost of discipleship. I do hope not. But at least, this is not the time to confuse readers about the nature of our stance. Those who are confused or confusing about this matter will not be salt and light, but will have to accept partial responsibility for the continued drift of modern thought away from biblical norms.

Theory and Practice

As I read the book, I tried to put myself in Elmer’s shoes. Would Elmer have been persuaded, or helped, by Muller’s argument? Of course, Muller portrays Elmer as being rather oafish; perhaps the real Elmer was unteachable. But he was at least intelligent enough to earn a D.Min. degree at a school that had Richard Muller on the faculty, so he cannot have been brain-dead. And in any case, I know of others who are intelligent enough, and who have some knowledge of culture and historical theology, who nevertheless echo Elmer’s sentiments.

There is a real problem today as to the applicability of the “traditional fourfold curriculum” to the pastorate, and we must not brush that problem aside as mere anti-intellectual laziness. We can, of course, understand why Muller himself, in his seven-year pastoral experience, found his studies so useful. He is a very gifted scholar and communicator. He has the eyes to see the present relevance of historical events, and the words to teach

that relevance vividly to others. And he ministers in a denomination that has traditionally cultivated a large appreciation for gifts of that sort. But there are others, not necessarily stupid or culturally ignorant, who have had very different experiences.

There is a lot of Elmer in me. Muller would probably recognize me as a “bearer of culture,” from my general education at Princeton and Yale and my very traditional theological studies at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia (1961–64). I have never been the full-time pastor of a church, but I have done much preaching, teaching, and counseling over the years, and much of that has been disappointing in its results. When I returned to Westminster in a teaching capacity in 1968, Jay Adams had been added to the faculty and was developing his concept of *nouthetic counseling*. Without getting into detailed evaluation of this concept, I must say that I was delighted (and a bit envious) to see how students like myself, without great gifts for interpersonal ministry, nevertheless found themselves “competent to counsel” by following Adams’s methods. Nouthetic counseling is a theological concept, but it is also a set of techniques. And it has seemed to me that students at Westminster have needed to learn more, not fewer, “techniques.” I have known a good number of bright, well-educated, cultured men who have been shipwrecked in the pastorate because they never learned *how-tos*. And I have known others who have turned failure into success by learning a few techniques.

Muller tends to deplore the modern emphasis on “technique” at the expense of classical learning. My view is that both are valuable for pastors. Therefore, hard choices have to be made. Ideally, I have often thought, a seminary degree should require four or even five years. But the economics of the situation will not permit that. So how do we seek balance? I do not get much help from Muller in answering that question. He is so busy fighting for the maintenance of classical learning that he does not bother to wrestle with the hard questions of curriculum design. He is like a congressman fighting for the needs of his own district who has no time—or heart—for considering the overall national welfare.

Nor will I try to answer those questions here. But surely here as in every other perplexity we need to seek God’s wisdom. What does the Bible say about the nature of training for the pastorate? Scripture

does, after all, have much to say about wisdom, the knowledge of God, revelation, and the office of pastor-teacher. My own view is that while Scripture values the special gifts of intellectuals such as Isaiah, Luke, and Paul, it does not require such gifts of all teaching elders. The biblical qualifications for elders are mainly ethical and spiritual, with some emphasis on ability to teach. Certainly the latter requires some “head knowledge.” But the heavy emphasis of Muller on being a “bearer of culture” seems oddly out of sync with the NT.¹³

In my view, the church ought to encourage a “learned ministry” up to a point. But there is danger here. Was the Presbyterian Church correct, in the early nineteenth century, to insist on an educated ministry, thereby in effect conceding the frontier to the Methodists and Baptists (not to mention others, including secularists)? Should the churches of the Third World be denied pastors from among their own people until some of their number complete a university education? Consideration of such questions, along with the biblical data noted earlier, shows, I think, that however desirable a cultured ministry may be (especially in some situations), that goal must in general be secondary to others. There are people without Muller’s kind of learning (or at least without a great deal of it) who are nevertheless biblically qualified for the pastorate.

Certainly, hard, careful academic study can build character (though it does not always do this). But any kind of disciplined activity can build character (even the mastery of techniques). And it would be slanderous to claim that no one can have a good pastoral character without the experience of classical learning. Even if there are character traits that can be acquired *only* through classical learning, is it self-evident that these particular traits are required for the Christian ministry? So the “character-building” standard does not automatically answer the hard curricular question.

Again, Muller’s approach greatly disappoints me. He does not even touch on the question of biblical qualifications for eldership, nor on the

13. It is rather amusing, too, that although Muller tells us to be “bearers of culture,” he also echoes the fashionable “contextualization” rhetoric about how we must not, in missions, seek to impose Western culture on the rest of the world (pp. 202ff.). Well, what culture does he expect Western missionaries to be “bearers” of? Chinese? And if we are to be bearers of our own Western culture, how can we avoid being accused of “imposing” it on others?

biblical doctrines of knowledge and wisdom. He comes across as a cultural conservative, nostalgic for the good old days, recalling (I imagine) the time when ministers could sit around smoking pipes and discussing Chaucer, Aristotle, or Duns Scotus, reassuring their people that they had a certain intellectual depth that overshadowed any mere technical incompetence. Some people do find that an appealing scene. But such cultural conservatism is a frail reed. As we have seen in Muller's case, it easily makes common cause with cultural and theological liberalism; for academic scholarly types, even those of conservative temperament, tend to want to follow all the latest intellectual trends. Whatever happened to the Calvinist *semper reformanda*, the passion to reform all of life under the Word of God? How can that be reconciled with a merely conservative defense of the status quo?

And people like Elmer who, however uncultured they may be, have a passion for the care of souls will not find the arguments of such conservatism very weighty. What *ought* to move Elmer (note how we keep returning to the issue of normativity) is a biblical analysis of covenant wisdom and a theological exposition of how God uses extraordinary intellectual and spiritual gifts.¹⁴

I wish I did not have to be so negative about this book. I approached it with very positive anticipations. But reluctantly I have come to see it, for all its wealth of information, balance, and general cogency, as part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Some initial readers of this review article have suggested that my positive comments on the book sound rather hollow in the light of my severe criticisms, but those positive comments are quite sincere. This is an erudite and informative book, and, point by point, there is little that I can literally disagree with. I have quoted the few statements that are very disagreeable to me. But even where I have criticized Muller, I find some value in the points that he is trying to make. Certainly, for example, we should not naively read OT concepts as if they were NT concepts, or NT teachings as if they were identical to the statements of the later creeds. On all of that, Muller

14. Some of my own thoughts on the nature of ministerial preparation can be found in "Proposal for a New Seminary," *Journal of Pastoral Practice* 2, 1 (Winter 1978): 10–17. This article was republished with some revision as "Case Study: Proposals for a New North American Mode," in *Missions and Theological Education in World Perspective*, ed. Harvie M. Conn and Sam Rowen (Farmington, MI: Associates of Urbansu, 1984), 369–86.

is right. There are both continuities and discontinuities through the history of redemption, and these must be sorted out. But Muller's book is less than the sum of its parts. He overstates the discontinuities and then brings in the continuities (too little, too late) without intelligibly relating them to what he has said before.

Similarly, he is right that classical learning can develop character. But he presents this point without any reasonable sense of proportion, so that the reader will tend to write off this potentially valuable point as the expression of hidebound intellectualism.

Thus, the faults of the book are largely (but not entirely) faults of omission and emphasis. I usually discount criticism based on omission and emphasis, since no author can be expected to say and emphasize everything relevant to his subject. But there are always some things that must be said and said loudly, lest the entire picture be falsified. Omitting the vast implications of biblical inspiration in a book dealing with theological method, of all things, is no small error.¹⁵

I hope that readers will also learn some broader lessons from this encounter with Muller. (1) There are dangers in traditionalism as well as in liberalism, and many of those dangers are the same in both cases. (2) *History*, unless carefully defined in the light of Scripture, is not a suitable master-model for theological method. (3) We should overcome objections to "techniques" that are based mainly on snobbish or traditionalist prejudices.¹⁶ One great theological challenge of our time is to bring the new ecclesiastical techniques captive to Christ's Word.

15. My reaction to Muller's book mirrors my reaction to Hessel Bouma III et al., *Christian Faith, Health, and Medical Practice* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), a book that arises from the same cultural and theological milieu. My review of it was published in *Christian Renewal* (June 18, 1990): 16–17, chapter 26 in this volume. I must say that these and other writings (recall my earlier reference to Berkouwer) seem to indicate a trend rather than peculiarities of individual authors. That trend in my view is unfortunate.

16. Nor should we object to "techniques" simply because of the sovereignty of God. In Scripture, divine sovereignty and human responsibility are not opposed. God accomplishes his great work through our faithful service, and in that service we must seek to use the best methods available.

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