

CONCISE SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

An Introduction to
Christian Belief

A Revised and Enhanced Edition of
Salvation Belongs to the Lord

JOHN M. FRAME

Edited by John J. Hughes



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Italics within Scripture quotations indicate emphasis added.

Portions of the end-of-chapter resources have been adapted from Jonathan R. Huggins, *Study Guide to “Salvation Belongs to the Lord,”* with gratitude for his excellent work.

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To Debbie, Doreen, and Skip

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C. The Lord's Commands

BOOK CHAPTERS, FREE AUDIO LECTURES, AND *SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY*

MOST of the chapters in *Concise Systematic Theology* (CST) are enhanced versions of recorded lectures that John Frame gave in 2004 for the Institute for Theological Studies survey course in systematic theology.¹ These chapters are complemented by free audio lectures on the Frame-Poythress website (<https://frame-poythress.org/concise-systematic-theology-audio-lectures>). The table below correlates CST chapters (column 1) with their corresponding audio lectures (column 2) and with the corresponding chapters in Frame’s *Systematic Theology*² (ST, column 3). This third column provides readers with an easy way to study the topics covered in CST in their fuller form in ST.

The appendix in CST titled “QR Codes for Lectures” provides an individual QR code for each book chapter, which allows playing the lectures through any audio-equipped device (e.g., smartphone, tablet, computer) that supports QR codes.

1. See the Preface to the First Edition below for more information.

2. John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013). ED. NOTE: There are no counterparts in CST to these chapters in ST: ch. 3, “God’s Lordship as a Unique Worldview”; ch. 6, “The Family of God”; ch. 29, “God and Our Knowledge”; ch. 30, “Perspectives on Human Knowledge”; ch. 31, “Justifying Claims to Knowledge”; ch. 32, Resources for Knowing”; and ch. 33, “Angels and Demons.”

<i>Concise Systematic Theology</i>	Audio Lecture Links	<i>Systematic Theology</i>
1. God, the Lord	https://bit.ly/framecst01	Ch. 2
2. Who God Is and What He Does	https://bit.ly/framecst02	Chs. 7–19
3. God, Three in One	https://bit.ly/framecst03	Chs. 20–22
4. The Word of God	https://bit.ly/framecst04	Ch. 23
5. The Authority of the Bible	https://bit.ly/framecst05	Chs. 24–28
6. What Is Theology?	https://bit.ly/framecst06	Ch. 1
7. Man, the Image of God	https://bit.ly/framecst07	Chs. 34–35
8. Sin and Evil	https://bit.ly/framecst08	Chs. 14, 36
9. God's Covenants	https://bit.ly/framecst09	Ch. 4
10. Who Is Jesus Christ?	https://bit.ly/framecst10	Chs. 21, 37
11. What Did Jesus Do?	https://bit.ly/framecst11	Ch. 38
12. The Holy Spirit	https://bit.ly/framecst12	Ch. 39
13. Election, Calling, and Regeneration	https://bit.ly/framecst13	Chs. 40–41
14. Faith and Repentance	https://bit.ly/framecst14	Ch. 41
15. Justification and Adoption	https://bit.ly/framecst15	Ch. 42
16. Sanctification and Assurance	https://bit.ly/framecst16	Chs. 43–44
17. Perseverance and Glorification	https://bit.ly/framecst17	Chs. 44–45
18. The Nature of the Church	https://bit.ly/framecst18	Ch. 46
19. The Task of the Church	https://bit.ly/framecst19	Chs. 5, 47
20. The Means of Grace	https://bit.ly/framecst20	Ch. 48
21. The Sacraments	https://bit.ly/framecst21	Ch. 49
22. Heaven and Hell	https://bit.ly/framecst22	Ch. 50
23. The Events of the Last Days	https://bit.ly/framecst23	Ch. 51
24. How Then Shall We Live?	https://bit.ly/framecst24	Ch. 52

FOREWORD

I suspect that any reader of John Frame’s other lengthy and weighty publications—stretching on occasion to over a thousand pages—might be surprised by a volume carrying his name but titled *Concise Systematic Theology*. And yet at the end of the day, this may prove to be the most widely read and appreciated of all his works. I personally hope so.

This aspiration is by no means due to any lack of appreciation for the immense contribution that Dr. Frame has made in the various volumes in his *Theology of Lordship* series or his *History of Western Philosophy and Theology* or other works—but because this volume reveals a profound awareness of needs of Christians in general. For, as Martin Luther (also a professor of theology) put it, we are all theologians. The issue is whether we will be believing theologians, submissive to the Word of God; or whether, to use Paul’s language, we have “exchanged the truth about God for a lie [or more literally, *the lie*]” (Rom. 1:25).

So here is a book for every Christian. But we should not make the mistake of thinking that because it is *concise*, it is thereby “dumbed down.” Rather, what John Frame gives us here is “the essence” of theology. Nor is this simply theology without all its attendant “more academic” (and for the ordinary reader “less necessary”) elements—a kind of “theology for dummies.” For no “dummy” is likely to want to read these pages. It might even be better to think of *Concise Systematic Theology* as a “concentration” of theology, a kind of theological analogy to a multivitamin pill that provides us with what would otherwise be found in many individual vitamin supplements. So here we are given access to the expositions and insights that are characteristic of Professor Frame’s other works.

Of the many aspects of *Concise Systematic Theology* to which advance attention might be drawn, perhaps one in particular stands out. In these pages, new readers will probably encounter for the first time an undergirding principle that has been characteristic of the life and work of every great orthodox theologian and yet is often missing among Christians today. It may strike them first because of a distinctive term that John Frame uses. In fact, it is so distinctive that it is (as yet!) absent from the massive 20-volume, 600,000-entry *Oxford English Dictionary*. It is the word *triperspectivalism* (learn to pronounce it slowly a few times and it will soon trip off the tongue!).

We might be forgiven for thinking that *Concise Systematic Theology* could have spared its intended audience a multisyllabic term that is unfamiliar even to the scholarly compilers of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. But there is theological method to Professor Frame's apparent madness and in his evident fascination with the number three. It is, quite simply, that since God is Trinity, his Being as such must be the foundation and the goal of all theology, and also the master principle of all divine revealing and revelation. The biblically crafted lenses through which we are to view the world are therefore trifocals.

What dawns on us in this approach is that what has been a Cinderella doctrine to many Christians (perhaps including ourselves)—intellectually incomprehensible, mathematically unintelligible, and scarcely applicable to our Christian life (even if orthodoxy requires that we defend it)—turns out to be fundamental, essential, and limitlessly practical. Otherwise, why would Jesus spend so much time on the evening of his crucifixion talking to his anxious disciples about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (as he does in John 14–16)? Or why should his last words before his ascension tell the apostles how to pronounce the divine name properly? Or why should the first sacrament of the Christian life tell us that we have been baptized “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19)? Once seen, Trinitarian theology opens up for us a theological treasure trove that transforms our sense of God, our fellowship with him, our worship of him, our relationships with each other, and his adequacy to meet all our needs. And *Concise Systematic Theology* is Trinitarian theology. It may well leave us wondering why, in so much modern Christianity, this glorious truth about God has been hidden from us.

There is more, much more, in *Concise Systematic Theology*. In fact, it turns out to be *expansive* theology. If, as I was, you were brought up on textbooks that conveniently (if perhaps unwisely) contained the answers to exercises at the back of the book, you will appreciate the extensive glossary of terms included here—and you can consult it without fear of conscience that to do so is cheating! And besides that, we soon discover that John Frame writes in a style unusual for theologians. Systematic theology books tend to be viewed by their authors as objective statements and discussions of what has been and is to be believed. The one word almost never used after the preface is *I*. Not so with John Frame. In these pages, he wants to talk to us—to you and to me—individually and personally. You will hear him speaking to you out of the book when you are sitting on the couch holding it in your hand, or as it lies flat in front of you on the desk. Or perhaps as you are reading, you will feel as though he is sitting beside you, engaging you in conversation, sharing his considerable knowledge and insight with you as though he were your friend.

I vividly remember waiting for a prescription to be filled at the pharmacy and catching sight of a prominently displayed notice to the effect that the pharmacist could actually make your medicine taste better for an additional dollar. Presumably no insurance company or government program was prepared to provide this luxury treatment that would take away patients' apparent fear of medicine that does you good but leaves a nasty taste. I suspect that many Christians have the same instinctive reaction to the word *theology*. And truth be told, some presentations of it are more difficult to swallow than others. And although they mean to do us good, some expositions do leave a bad taste in the mouth. Here, however, we are provided with theology in a style that leaves a good taste in our mouth. What our friendly pharmacist does for us by making our medicine taste good, John Frame does for us—and without additional charge! For *Concise Systematic Theology* is friendly theology, and I suspect it will become a valued friend to many Christians.

So now, enjoy this medicine for your mind, your affections, your will, and indeed your whole life. Professor Frame has filled your prescription!

Sinclair B. Ferguson
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Teaching Fellow, Ligonier Ministries

PREFACE TO THE REVISED EDITION

JOHN Frame is widely recognized as a wise, creative, and deeply biblical theologian. His importance can hardly be exaggerated. In his foreword to Frame’s *Festschrift*, the late J. I. Packer wrote:

There are few, past or present, whom I would place . . . ahead of Professor Frame. . . . He has been privileged to make a strategic and potentially huge contribution to the future well-being . . . of the entire evangelical world. . . .

The range and breadth of the knowledge and the wisdom of John Frame are indeed remarkable. May the legacy that he is leaving to the evangelical cause and the church at large soon come to be appreciated as its true and abiding worth.¹

Frame’s theological writings epitomize the Reformation principles of *sola Scriptura* and *soli Deo gloria*, and they provide, as Christopher Watkin stated in his endorsement for this theological gem, “a thoroughly biblical framework for understanding and applying Christian doctrine.”

Concise Systematic Theology (CST) is the mature fruit of Frame’s multi-decades-long teaching of theology and ethics at Westminster Theological Seminary, Westminster Seminary California, and Reformed Theological Seminary (Orlando). It builds on the books in his celebrated Lordship series,²

1. John J. Hughes, ed., *Speaking the Truth in Love: The Theology of John M. Frame* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), xvi–xvii.

2. *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (1987), *The Doctrine of God* (2002), *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (2008), and *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (2010), all published by P&R Publishing.

but unlike those large volumes and his 1,200-page *Systematic Theology*,³ *CST* provides a *concise* systematic treatment of all the doctrines of Scripture: God, man, the person and work of Christ, the application of the work of redemption, the church and the means of grace, and the last things. But *CST* is not a mere summary of other books; it is a fresh, new presentation of biblical teaching, written in a manner that will make you think that John Frame is talking to you!

In his preface to the original edition of *CST*, Frame explains that this book is a survey that focuses “on the big picture rather than the details” and that carefully defines technical terms. It is directed primarily, Frame notes, “to beginners in theology, people who are seeking a basic introduction,” while being “college or seminary level in difficulty.”⁴ *CST* is an ideal *introduction* to Reformed systematic theology and Frame’s theological writings on the one hand, while being an ideal *textbook* for a broad range of readers on the other. All of Frame’s big ideas are carefully introduced in this volume, and its big-picture approach helps readers grasp the general shape and content of the Bible’s teaching, without getting lost in a myriad of technical theological details.

CST introduces all the major biblical truths in a warm, winsome, and conversational style that invites readers to keep turning its pages. *CST* is deep enough to use as an introductory text and clear enough that any educated reader should find it easy to understand. It does an amazing job of introducing the whole counsel of God to readers of all levels in a way that will enrich their minds and encourage their hearts. Additionally, *CST* is practical and devotional—attributes that are unusual in theological writing. Frame defines *theology* as “the application of Scripture to all areas of human life,”⁵ and this practical focus characterizes *CST* throughout. Many times while reading it, I have broken into spontaneous praise as some truth that Frame has stated in a pithy, creative way penetrates my mind and heart.

Frame’s detailed summary at the end of the book shows how each chapter in *CST* is built on and develops his big ideas.⁶ He states:

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

4. *CST*, xxx.

5. *CST*, 91.

6. “Summary and Conclusion.”

This book on systematic theology has been, in effect, a book on God's lordship, its outworkings, and its applications. As we come now to summarize what we have studied, I will again focus on the lordship of God. We saw in chapter 1 that the word *Lord* connotes especially three ideas. There is his *control*, or *power*, over the whole universe, so great and comprehensive that he works "all things according to the counsel of his will" (Eph. 1:11). Then there is his *authority*, his right to be obeyed by all his creatures. Finally, there is his *covenant presence*, in which he takes creatures to be his own and promises to be with them: both geographically near to them and near to them as the one who cares enough about them to bless and, indeed, sometimes to curse.

In chapter 6, I generalized this pattern to say that anything in God or in the world can be viewed from three perspectives [situational, existential, and normative].

The remainder of the summary spells out how the ideas of *lordship* and *multiple perspectives* are developed and applied throughout the book, doctrine by doctrine, thus making the summary an especially helpful high-level tool for reviewing *CST* as a whole.

CST is a revised and enhanced edition of *Salvation Belongs to the Lord: An Introduction to Systematic Theology (SBL)*, which P&R published in 2006. While the text of this new edition remains largely unchanged, I have added the following enhancements to make *CST* more helpful for personal and classroom use:

- Four types of end-of-chapter helps: key terms, study questions, memory verses, and resources for further study.
- A complete bibliography.
- An extensive glossary that is cross-referenced to *CST*'s chapters.
- A comprehensive analytical outline.

In keeping with the nature of the glossaries that Frame created for his other books, *CST*'s glossary provides fulsome explanations of all the key terms listed at the end of its chapters, using, as much as possible, Frame's own words or paraphrases of them. The numbers following the headwords

in the glossary refer to the chapters in which they are listed as key terms. For example, **special revelation (4)** means that **special revelation** was a key term in chapter 4, “The Word of God.” This cross-referencing helps readers know where to turn to read Frame’s discussions of each of the 234 key terms, thus making the glossary a useful way to review *CST*’s main theological topics.

Frame’s “big books”—his Lordship series volumes, *Systematic Theology*, and *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology*⁷—include analytical outlines that serve as detailed roadmaps to alert readers to what is discussed and where. To assist readers of *CST* in that regard, I have added a complete analytical outline, based on each chapter’s internal headings.

Additionally, I added a chapter titled “Book Chapters, Free Lectures, and *Systematic Theology*” whose main feature is a table that correlates each chapter in *CST* with its counterpart(s) in Frame’s much larger *Systematic Theology* (*ST*) on the one hand and with links to Frame’s twenty-four audio lectures from which *CST* was created on the other.⁸ The correlation of *CST*’s chapters with those in *ST* will enable interested readers to quickly locate Frame’s fuller discussions of all doctrinal topics, and the correlation of *CST*’s chapters with Frame’s audio lectures will enable readers to listen to Frame present in lecture form the material from which the book was derived.

While *CST* is built, in part, on Frame’s Lordship series,⁹ it unknowingly anticipated Frame’s then-unplanned *ST*.¹⁰ *CST* and *ST* are both *systematic* theologies; readers of both books will see strong parallels between them in terms of their structure and substance—not surprising, since they have the same author. This parallelism of form and content and the unity of their authorship made it possible for me to repurpose many of *ST*’s end-of-chapter helps in *CST*, thus enhancing and enriching the latter. For example, a majority of the study questions in *CST* are drawn from the ones that Frame created

7. John M. Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015).

8. *CST* began life in 2004 as a series of audio lectures given for the now-defunct Institute for Theological Studies in Grand Rapids, Michigan. These enhanced audio lectures are available to listen to for free at the links provided in the table. See the preface to the original edition of *CST* for more information about the relationship of the lectures to the contents of the book.

9. See the preface to the original edition for details.

10. *CST* was published in 2006; *ST* was published in 2013.

for *ST*, and all the “Resources for Further Study” in *CST* come from *ST*, as do many of the memory verses.

For a systematic theology, *CST* is unusually rich in its full citations of Scripture and its many references to biblical passages. Frame explains the reason for this near the end of chapter 6, “What Is Theology?”:

The important thing in systematic theology is making a case, and ultimately, making a case means going back to the Scriptures. . . . To decide what we must believe, we must go back to God’s Word. . . . The Bible is the final authority. That is why, in the final analysis, systematic theology should be exegetical. Whatever else it does, it must set forth the teaching of the Scriptures first and foremost. . . .

. . . Remember that your ultimate purpose as a theologian is to expound Scripture, Scripture alone, *sola Scriptura*.¹¹

Frame’s biblically grounded, exegetical methodology roots his teaching in Scripture itself, rather than in church tradition, though not to the neglect of the latter. Frame speaks of the importance of “going meticulously through the biblical data”¹² to prove each doctrinal point. Since *CST* is a *concise* and *introductory* systematic theology, it cannot cover as many passages per doctrine or deal with them in as much depth as you will find in Frame’s *ST* and in the Lordship series volumes, for example, but you may rest assured that decades of careful and meticulous examination of all the biblical data undergird Frame’s doctrinal discussions and conclusions in *CST*. In keeping with his biblically grounded, exegetical approach, at the end of each chapter I have included memory verses—full quotations of key Scripture passages related to the topics that the chapter covers—to encourage memorization and growth.

I wish to thank Bryce Craig, P&R’s president, and my colleagues Dave Almack and Amanda Martin for their support on this project. I also wish to thank Karen Magnuson for her excellent copyediting on the end-of-chapter helps, the bibliography, and other matters, but especially for her labors to turn the glossary into a thing of beauty! Thanks also to Mary Ruth Murdoch for her precise proofreading. Many thanks to my son Ryan

11. *CST*, 104.

12. *CST*, 103.

Hughes for the wonderful work that he did to clean up and enhance the twenty-four audio lectures, and thanks to Mark Ward, webmaster of the <http://www.frame-poythress.org> site, for his willingness to host these lectures and for providing links to them.

Finally, I wish to express my deep and abiding gratitude to John Frame for writing *CST* and for his rich writing ministry as a whole, which I have treasured throughout the years. The following words from James Anderson's endorsement for *CST* perfectly express my own thoughts:

There's no one I trust more as a teacher of theology than John Frame. His unwavering commitment to the authority, clarity, and sufficiency of Scripture is coupled with a brilliant intellect, not to mention an enviable ability to communicate profound truths in ways that impact both mind and heart. I have enthusiastically recommended the original edition of this book on many occasions. With the enhancements in the new edition, *Concise Systematic Theology* will continue to be my first recommendation as an introduction to Christian doctrine.

John J. Hughes
Whitefish, Montana

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

A number of years ago I began writing a multivolume series of theological studies that examine major biblical topics from the perspective of the lordship of God. Known as the Theology of Lordship, the series comprises two volumes thus far, and two more volumes are either in progress or planned.

People have sometimes asked me if I intended to make the Theology of Lordship series into a complete systematic theology. I have always answered no. My purpose in that series is not to cover all the topics of systematics but to discuss a few of them in depth. Furthermore, although I have taught the doctrines of Scripture, God, and ethics for thirty-five years, I have never taught some of the other loci of systematics at the seminary level, such as the atonement, the *ordo salutis*, and eschatology. So I thought I probably was not equipped to write a comprehensive systematic theology.

But in the summer of 2003 Mark Sigmon of the Institute for Theological Studies in Grand Rapids, Michigan, asked if I would tape lectures for a “survey course” in systematics. I have always admired the work of ITS, particularly its ministry to developing churches. Honored to be asked, I delivered those lectures as the institute’s course “Foundations of Systematic Theology” in 2004. As a bit of icing on the cake, ITS gave me the right to use that material in any printed form I desired, and P&R Publishing Company quickly expressed interest. Most of the chapters in *Salvation Belongs to the Lord* are enhanced versions of those taped lectures. I’ve added notes and several additional topics, such as chapter 24 on ethics (“How Then Shall We Live?”).

This book will not be part of the Theology of Lordship series, but readers of those books will find here the same approach: exegetical, Reformed, and

focused on the lordship of God and of Jesus Christ. As in the Lordship books, threefold distinctions abound here, some that you won't find elsewhere.

Parts of this introduction to systematic theology summarize the Lordship books. Chapters 1–3 and 10 and a few portions of other chapters summarize sections of *Doctrine of God*. Chapters 4–5 anticipate the teaching of my forthcoming *Doctrine of the Word of God*. Chapter 6 recalls elements of *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*. Chapter 24 summarizes *Doctrine of the Christian Life*, which I'm currently writing. And the "Summary and Conclusion" lists a catalog of lordship triads from all the loci in the manner of the Lordship volumes.

Nevertheless, *Salvation Belongs to the Lord* is not directed primarily to readers of the Lordship series but to beginners in theology, people who are seeking a basic introduction. For them I have tried to adopt a more conversational tone (at times, indeed, it may sound just like a voice on a tape!). I have also tried especially hard to explain my technical terms. I do hope that this approach will give such readers the basic lay of the land in the theology of the Bible, and I pray that it will leave them eager for more.

If you are new to reading theology, let me address you now. Survey courses and books have the reputation of being easy and/or superficial, but I consider this work to be college or seminary level in difficulty. I intend to challenge you to think hard about these matters and to learn some technical terms, to ask some tough questions, and to dig deeply into the Word of God. Since *Salvation Belongs to the Lord* is a survey, we will be focusing on the big picture rather than the details. But understanding the big picture takes some intellectual and spiritual discipline—at least as much as it takes to understand the details.

By focusing on the big picture you can sometimes learn important things that you might pass over in a more detailed study. Here I intend to emphasize the general shape of the biblical teaching and to give you some basic categories, some hooks on which you can hang the various things you learn. One of these hooks is a system of threes, the aforementioned lordship triads, which runs through the whole book. This system is mainly a pedagogical device, but I hope it will show you some important ways in which everything in the Bible is tied together. As you will see, the Bible is not a miscellaneous collection of ideas but a coherent, consistent system of truth in which the major doctrines depend on one another.

Preface to the First Edition

I wish to thank Mark Sigmon and the ITS Board for giving me the opportunity to work on this important project. Thanks also to Darrell Yoder and other members of the wonderful ITS staff who assisted me in so many ways. I am grateful again, as so many times before, to P&R Publishing for understanding and appreciating my work. Thanks especially to Ted Ojarovsky for editing this volume.

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>BRD</i>	Herman Bavinck, <i>Reformed Dogmatics</i> , 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003–8)
<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)
ESV	English Standard Version
<i>GST</i>	Wayne Grudem, <i>Systematic Theology</i> (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994)
<i>Institutes</i>	John Calvin, <i>Institutes of the Christian Religion</i> , ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960)
KJV	King James Version
<i>MCW</i>	<i>Collected Writings of John Murray</i> , 4 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976–82)
NIV	New International Version
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
WCF	Westminster Confession of Faith (Atlanta: Committee for Christian Education and Publications, Presbyterian Church in America, 1986); published together with the WLC, the WSC, and proof texts

Abbreviations

WLC	Westminster Larger Catechism
WSC	Westminster Shorter Catechism
WTJ	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>

Part 1

The Doctrine of God

1

GOD, THE LORD

ABSTRACT

Who is God? The Bible most often describes him as *Lord*. *Lord* is the name of a profoundly *holy person* in covenant *relationship* with us. This chapter will explore the meaning of God's lordship in terms of his control, authority, and presence, as well as the related concepts of transcendence and immanence.

IN this book I will introduce you to the discipline of systematic theology. I'll discuss the nature of systematic theology itself in chapter 6. But I think we need to *do* some systematic theology together before we try to define it. Just for now, however, let me say that theology is the human attempt to apply the Bible to people's questions and, indeed, to all human needs.

Systematic theology is *topical* theology. It studies the Bible not by going from Genesis to Revelation but by exploring topics treated in various parts of Scripture, like the topics of God, man, revelation, Christ, the last days. Theologians have sometimes called these topics *loci*, the Latin plural of *locus* ("place"). So systematic theology asks "whole Bible" questions: What does the whole Bible teach about God? About sin? About justification by faith? These are some of the topics we'll be looking at.

This book is an introductory survey of systematic theology, and therefore it will not cover each topic in great detail. Many theologians give book-length treatment to, say, God and man, or the person and work of Christ, or the events of the last days.¹ In this book, however, we will be covering briefly, in twenty-four chapters, the whole content of systematic theology. I'll try to give you the main gist of each doctrinal area, so that you will have a good foundation. I hope it will motivate some of you to study some specific areas more intensively.

This first chapter, not surprisingly, is about God. In fact, we'll spend three chapters on the doctrine of God, what some theologians call *theology proper*, because even in a survey this is the foundation for everything else.² How important it is to know God! Jesus prayed to his Father, "This is eternal life, that they may know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3).

Who is God, anyway? The WSC in one of its most famous definitions says, "God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth" (WSC 4). That's an excellent statement. I think that everything in that statement is biblical. But it's interesting to note that the Bible doesn't contain this kind of definition of *God*.

How, then, does the Bible introduce us to God? It begins with an *act* of God: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). I believe Moses wrote the book of Genesis, and he wrote it for the benefit of the people of Israel, whom God had delivered miraculously from slavery in Egypt. These people didn't need a definition of *God*. They already knew who God was. He was the one who led them out of Egypt. So the book of Genesis does not include a definition. It begins by telling the people that the God they know already, the God who led them out of Egypt, is also the one who created the heavens and the earth.

How did the Israelites of Moses' generation come to know God? First through the stories of their forefathers. When God spoke to Moses, he identified himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But to the Israelites

1. For my own efforts along these same lines, see my *DKG*, *DG*, and *DCL*.

2. The word *theology* literally means "study of God," so it is applied to this locus in a "proper" way. But of course, the word is used more broadly to cover any exposition of the content of a religion, in this case the Christian faith.

these three patriarchs were ancient history. God had helped them centuries earlier. When Moses was born, Israel had been in Egypt for four hundred years. Originally the Egyptians had been friendly to them, but later pharaohs arose who hated them and subjected them to slavery. Israel cried out to God for help, but for those four hundred years God was silent. Many Israelites must have wondered why God did not answer their cries for help. Perhaps some of them even doubted whether the old stories were true.

Yet God did answer their prayers. He began by appearing to Moses. We learn about this meeting between Moses and God in Exodus 3, and I think that passage is the real beginning of the biblical doctrine of God. We read about God in Genesis, but the author of Genesis met God in Exodus 3.

In this passage Moses sees a bush that burns but doesn't burn up. The flames do not consume it. It turns out that the burning bush is a place where God is, a place where God wants to talk with Moses. God is everywhere, of course, but sometimes he makes his presence known in a very intense way. So God calls Moses and tells him to remove his shoes, for the area of the bush is holy ground. God identifies himself as the God of Moses' father and of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He says that he has seen the affliction of Israel and has heard their cry. He now intends to bring them out of Egypt to the land of Canaan, which he promised to their forefathers. Moses is to be his prophet, his spokesman.

Understandably, Moses is overwhelmed by this responsibility. God assures him that he will be successful. God will deliver Israel, and they will worship God on this very mountain, the mountain of the burning bush. But Moses has another question: "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" (Ex. 3:13).

It seems like an odd question to us. *What is God's name?* Why would Moses ask something like that? Today, we give our kids names like *Billy* or *Susie* without much thought of the meaning of those names. You might call your daughter *Elizabeth* because you think the name sounds good or because it was your grandmother's name. But in the ancient Near East, names had meaning. *Abram* meant "high father," and Abram's new name, *Abraham*, given him by God, meant "father of a multitude." Usually, when a father gave a name to his son, he chose a name that didn't just sound good

but conveyed something of his hopes for the child, or his feelings about the child, or the circumstances of the child's birth. So to ask about God's name is to seek information about him. To seek God's name is to ask what kind of God he is.

We should be interested in God's answer to Moses' question. How does God identify himself? How does God say who he is to the author of the first books of the Bible? We wait with bated breath, on the edge of our seats, to hear God's name.

God's name is, at first, rather bewildering. "God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.' And he said, 'Say this to the people of Israel, "I AM has sent me to you"' (Ex. 3:14). God here gives his name in a long form, "I AM WHO I AM," and in a short form, simply "I AM." The long form is difficult Hebrew. It can be translated in present or future tenses, and the relative pronoun translated "who" in the English Standard Version of the Bible (ESV hereafter) can be translated in a variety of other ways as well. I can't explore all these translations here, but the main point is that God's answer to Moses is mysterious, to say the least. Even the short form of the name, "I AM," is difficult. It is a familiar phrase, as when one says "I am John" or "I am a teacher." But what can be meant by "I AM" just by itself?

It will help us, however, to go on to verse 15: "God also said to Moses, 'Say this to the people of Israel, "The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you. This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations."' Here we see the mysterious name in still a third form. We've seen it in a long form, a short form, and now a very short form, a one-word form translated "LORD." The word LORD in the ESV represents the word *Yahweh* in Hebrew. *Yahweh* is derived, evidently, from a form of the verb "to be," so it is connected with the repeated "I AM" in verse 14. Some older English Bibles render this word as "Jehovah," but most of them now follow the example of the KJV and translate it "LORD."

Verse 15 says that this is the way God wants to be known, the name by which he is to be remembered for all generations. So the English word "Lord"—representing the Hebrew *Yahweh*, another Hebrew word, *adon*, and the Greek *kyrios*—occurs over seven thousand times in our Bibles, mostly referring to God the Father or, and this is important, to Jesus Christ.

Our Jewish friends today often use Deuteronomy 6:4–5 as a kind of confession of faith: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” This is a confession of lordship. There is only one God, and he is Yahweh, the Lord. The Christians of the NT also confessed lordship: Jesus is Lord (Rom. 10:9–10; 1 Cor. 12:3; Phil. 2:11). We should notice, too, that over and over again in Scripture, God says he is going to do this or that so that people “shall know that I am the LORD” (as Ex. 6:7; 7:5, 17; 8:22; 14:4; 29:46; Isa. 45:6; 49:23, 26; Jer. 16:21; 24:7; etc.). So we may say that “God is Lord” is the fundamental confession of the people of God in the OT. The fundamental confession of the NT people of God is “Jesus is Lord.” That is a way of summarizing the main content of the Bible: “God is Lord” is the message of the OT; “Jesus is Lord” is the message of the NT.

So if we want to know the God of Scripture, we must come to know his lordship. There are, of course, many other concepts that are helpful in understanding God, such as the “infinite, eternal, unchangeable” of the WSC, and we will look at some of those. But we need to start somewhere, and it would be hard to find any starting point more appropriate than that of lordship. So we ask, what does it mean for God to be Lord?

To begin with, I should emphasize that *Lord* is a personal name. So our God is a *person*. That is a tremendously important fact. We know that in our world there are personal beings, like Joey, Cindy, Yo-Yo Ma, Sammy Sosa, George Bush, and so on. The world also contains impersonal beings, like rocks, trees, the law of gravity, tornadoes, Brussels sprouts, matter, motion, space, time, and chance. Secularists usually try to argue that the personal reduces to the impersonal: in the end, Joey, Cindy, and Yo-Yo Ma are ultimately just matter, motion, space, time, and chance. But the Bible teaches the opposite: the impersonal reduces to the personal. Matter, motion, space, time, and chance are, ultimately, tools used by one great Person to organize and run the universe he has made.

Another point that we can get from Exodus 3 is that the Lord is a supremely *holy* person. That is, he is separate from us and transcendent over us. We may not approach him without supreme respect. Holiness also means that God is supremely righteous and good, and that he must cross a great barrier to have any fellowship with sinners like you and me. But more of that later.

The main meaning of the name *Lord* is that he is the head of a *covenant*. In a covenant, God takes a people to be his. The heart of it, often recorded in Scripture, is his saying, “I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Heb. 8:10; cf. Ex. 6:7; Lev. 26:12; Jer. 7:23; 11:4; 2 Cor. 6:16; Rev. 21:3). He rules them by his law (in a written document, as we will see), and he delivers them from destruction and death. So the covenant includes both law and grace. We’ll think some more about covenants in chapter 9.

The name *Lord* also tells us about his *nature*, what kind of God he is. Scripture typically associates three ideas with the idea of lordship, to which I’ve given the names *control*, *authority*, and *presence*. I warned you that this book would include a lot of threefold distinctions. This is the first of them, and there will be a lot of others that coordinate with these. I will call these the *lordship attributes*. Let’s look at them in turn.

Control

When God comes to Moses and identifies himself as Lord, he comes in *power*. He heard the cry of the Israelites, and he comes to deliver them from the oppression of the Egyptians, with a mighty hand and a strong arm. Pharaoh is the most powerful totalitarian ruler of his day, and the might of Egypt is thought to be invulnerable. But God works powerful miracles and gains a decisive victory over Egypt’s land, its rulers, its armies, and its gods (Ex. 12:12; 15:11; 18:11). He is gracious to whom he will be gracious, and he shows mercy to whom he will show mercy (Ex. 33:19). So he judges Egypt but saves Israel. What he intends to do, he accomplishes. Nothing is too hard for him (Jer. 32:27; Gen. 18:14). His word is never void of power (Isa. 55:11). His prophecies always come to pass (Deut. 18:21–22).

This is what we often call the *sovereignty of God*. Everything that happens in the world comes from him. He is the one who sends rain, thunder, and lightning (Pss. 65:9–11; 135:6–7; 147:15–18). He makes things freeze, then melts the ice. The smallest details of nature are under his control: the falling of a sparrow, the number of hairs on your head (Matt. 6:26–30; 10:29–30). And the events that we call random, that we ascribe to chance, are really God at work. Look at Proverbs 16:33: “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every

decision is from the LORD.” Just roll dice. Whether you get a six or an eight or a twelve, the number comes from God; it’s God’s decision.

God rules not only the little things but the big things, too. How could it be otherwise, since the big things are combinations of little things? He determines what nations will dwell in which territory (Acts 17:26). He decides what king is to rule, when, and where (Isa. 44:28). He decides whether the purpose of a nation will stand or fall (Ps. 33:10–11). And he decided, once, that wicked people would take the life of his own dear Son, so that we, we sinners, might live (Acts 2:23–24).

God rules not only the important events of human history but also the lives of individual people like you and me. He knits us together in our mothers’ wombs (Ps. 139:13–16). He decides whether we will travel or stay home (James 4:13–17).

Does this mean that God controls even our free decisions? Certainly he does. Joseph’s brothers sold him into slavery in order to harm him. That was their free decision, and they are responsible for it. But ultimately, it was God who used their evil deed to accomplish his good purpose (Gen. 45:5–8). Indeed, Scripture often ascribes to God even the sinful behavior of human beings. He made Israel’s enemies to hate her (Ps. 105:24–25). He hardened Pharaoh’s heart against his people (Ex. 4:21; Rom. 9:18). He moved Judas, Herod, and Pontius Pilate to bring about the death of Jesus (Acts 2:23; 4:28).

But God also works wondrously to bring good! God’s power, God’s control, also brings about our faith and repentance, so that we can have eternal life in Christ. Paul says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:8–10). Faith is not something we work up in ourselves. God gives it to us as his gift. He *opens* our heart to believe (Acts 16:14–15). We believe because he *appoints* us to eternal life (Acts 13:48). He *draws* us to himself (John 6:44), *gives* us faith (John 6:65; Phil. 1:29). Yes, we also choose him, but he chooses us first (Eph. 1:4; John 1:12).

God’s control means that he is sovereign over everything that happens in the whole universe. Hear these passages:

Who has spoken and it came to pass,
unless the Lord has commanded it?
Is it not from the mouth of the Most High
that good and bad come? (Lam. 3:37–38)

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. (Rom. 8:28)

In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will. (Eph. 1:11)

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

“For who has known the mind of the Lord,
or who has been his counselor?”
“Or who has given a gift to him
that he might be repaid?”

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. (Rom. 11:33–36)

Here, in the very first chapter of the survey, I am teaching you the doctrine of *predestination*. I know predestination is difficult. We ask, for example, if God predestines everything, what happens to human freedom? Good question. We’ll deal with it in chapter 7. Another important question is, how can God bring evil things to pass if he is holy, just, and good? That’s a real difficult one, and it has brought a lot of grief to some people. We’ll have to look at that carefully, but we can’t do it now. I hope you can wait until chapter 8 for our discussion of the problem of evil. For now, I will say only that when God brings about human sinful actions, he does it for his own good purposes. We may not always know what those purposes are, but God assures us that they are good. And he assures us of his goodness and justice by sending his own Son to die for our sins.

Authority

The second of the three lordship attributes is his *authority*. God's authority is his *right to tell his creatures what they must do*. Control is about might; authority is about right. Control means that God makes everything happen; authority means that God has the right to be obeyed, and therefore we have the obligation to obey him.

God's authority is part of his lordship. When God meets with Moses in Exodus 3, he gives him an authoritative message—Let my people go, that they may serve me—which has authority even over Pharaoh (Ex. 4:12). When God meets with Israel at Mount Sinai, he identifies himself as Lord (Ex. 20:1–2) and then tells them to have no other gods before him (v. 3). God's lordship means that we must obey his Ten Commandments and any other commandments he chooses to give us. So God calls us to confess his lordship and then go on to obey all his commandments (Deut. 6:4–6). Jesus, too, says over and over again, in various ways, “If you love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:21, 23; 15:10, 14; 1 John 2:3–6; 3:22, 24; 5:3; 2 John 6; Rev. 12:17; 14:12). “How,” he asks, “can you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ when you don’t do the things I say?” (Luke 6:46 paraphrased; cf. Matt. 7:21–22).

God's authority is *absolute*. That means, first, that we shouldn't doubt or question it. Paul says that Abraham “wavered not” in his belief in God's promise (Rom. 4:16–22). Abraham was certainly tempted to waver. God had promised him the land of Canaan, but although he lived there, he owned not one square inch. God had promised him a son, who would in turn have more descendants than the sand of the sea. But Abraham's wife, Sarah, was beyond the age of childbearing, and Abraham was over one hundred years old before the promise was fulfilled. Nevertheless, Abraham clung to God's authoritative word, even against the evidence of his senses. And so should we.

Second, the absoluteness of God's authority means that his lordship transcends all our other loyalties. We are right to be loyal to our parents, our nation, our friends; but God calls us to love him with *all* our heart, that is, without any rival. Jesus told his disciples to honor their parents (Matt. 15:3–6), but he told them to honor him even more (Matt. 10:34–38; cf. Matt. 8:19–22; 22:37; Phil. 3:7–8).

Third, to say that God's authority is absolute means that it covers all areas of human life. Paul says that "whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31; cf. Rom. 14:23; Col. 3:17, 24; 2 Cor. 10:5). Everything we do is either to God's glory or it is not. God has the right to order every aspect of human life.

Covenant Presence

God's lordship means that he controls everything and speaks with absolute authority. There is also a third element to God's lordship, and in some ways this is the deepest and most precious. That element is his commitment to us and, therefore, his presence with us.

As noted earlier, the essence of the covenant is God's word, "I will be your God, and you will be my people." God said that to Israel under Moses (Ex. 6:7) and to the NT people of God (2 Cor. 6:16). He declared this promise many times throughout Scripture (Gen. 17:7; Ex. 6:7; 29:45; Lev. 26:12; Jer. 7:23; 11:4; 24:7; 30:22; Ezek. 11:20; 14:11; 36:28; 37:27; Heb. 11:16; Rev. 21:3). This means that the covenant Lord is one who takes people to be his own.

When God takes us to be his people, he fights our battles, blesses us, loves us, and sometimes gives us special judgments because of our sins (as Amos 3:2). Most importantly, he is *with* us. He places his name upon us (Num. 6:27), so that he dwells with us and we with him. In the OT, God literally dwelled with Israel, as he placed his theophany, his visible presence, in the tabernacle and then in the temple. In the NT, Jesus is Immanuel, "God with us" (Isa. 7:14; Matt. 1:23; cf. Gen. 21:22; 26:28; 28:15; 39:3-4). He is God "tabernacling" among us (John 1:14). And after his resurrection, he sends the Spirit to dwell in us, as in a temple (1 Cor. 3:16).

Control, authority, presence. Those are the main biblical concepts that explain the meaning of God's lordship.

Transcendence and Immanence

These lordship attributes, as I call them, will help us to get a clear idea of the concepts of *transcendence* and *immanence* that theologians often use to describe the biblical God. These are not biblical terms, but the Bible does

speak of God's being "on high" (Ps. 113:5; cf. 123:1; Isa. 5:16) as well as "with us." He is both "up there" and "down here." He is exalted, and he is near. When Scripture uses the "up there" language, theologians call it *transcendence*. When Scripture speaks of God "down here" with us, the theologians speak of *immanence*.

There are dangers, however, in the concepts of transcendence and immanence. I think, for example, that some theologians have misunderstood God's transcendence. They think it means that God is so far away from us that we cannot really know him, so far that human language can't describe him accurately, so far that to us he's just a great heavenly blur without any definite characteristics. This concept of transcendence is unbiblical. If God is transcendent in *that* way, how can he also be near to us? Furthermore, according to the Bible we *can* know definite things about God. Despite the limitations of human language, God is able to use human language to tell us clearly and accurately who he is and what he has done.

So I urge you to reject that theological concept of *transcendence*. If you are going to use that word at all, use it to describe God's enthronement. When Scripture speaks of God as "high," "exalted," "lifted up," it is not saying that he lives far away from us so that we can't know him. Rather, it's saying that God is King, that he is Lord. In other words, biblical transcendence is God's lordship attributes of control and authority.

Similarly, you should use the word *immanence*, if you use it at all, to describe God's covenant presence. Some theologians speak as though when God becomes immanent he becomes immersed in the world, hidden in the world, so that he cannot be distinguished from creaturely reality. But that is not biblical. God is always distinct from the world, for he is the Creator and we are the creature. Yet he is clearly revealed in the world (Ps. 19:1; Rom. 1:18–21). God does come to be with creatures, and that's something wonderful and precious.

Objections to Lordship as a Central Focus

There are, of course, a lot of perspectives by which to look at Scripture, and I think that lordship is an especially valuable one, simply because it is so central to the Bible itself. But some theologians have preferred other

approaches. Some, for example, prefer to focus on God's love and mercy. I agree that these are important, but I think their importance is most obvious from a lordship perspective. God's love and mercy are aspects of his covenant presence with his people. Furthermore, God's sovereignty magnifies his love and mercy, displaying their power, assuring us that his love always accomplishes his purpose.

To some, of course, the very emphasis on divine sovereignty is to be avoided. They want to leave more room for human free will (see chap. 7). But divine sovereignty, with the doctrine of predestination, is an important part of the Bible.

Others may object that the idea of lordship suggests medieval feudalism. It is important that we understand lordship first in biblical terms, not in terms of human cultures. The biblical view of God's lordship is very different from feudalism, though there are some things in common. The main difference is God's absolute control and authority, coupled with his presence with his people.

Another objection is that to focus on lordship obscures other biblical emphases. Certainly, any model emphasizes some biblical truth somewhat at the expense of other truth. The reason is that theology is not the Bible. Theology restates the truths of the Bible, so inevitably its emphasis will differ from Scripture itself. The only way to remedy that problem is to restrict theology so that it does nothing but read the Bible from Genesis to Revelation.

Certainly, lordship may profitably be balanced with other models, such as God as Father, Husband, and Redeemer. Of all these, I believe that lordship is most comprehensive, both in its pervasiveness throughout Scripture and in its ability to include and explain other models.

The first thing to remember about God is that he is Lord, Yahweh, the I AM. As the Lord, he is the personal, holy, head of the covenant. He is in full control of the world he has made, speaks to us with absolute authority, and commits himself to us as Immanuel, God with us.

Key Terms

authority
control

covenant presence
God

immanence	systematic theology
Lord	theology proper
lordship attributes	transcendence
sovereignty of God	Yahweh

Study Questions

1. Frame uses three terms to describe God's lordship. What are these *lordship attributes*, and how does he explain each one?
2. How did the Israelites of Moses' generation come to know God?
3. What is the fundamental confession of the people of God in the OT? In the NT?
4. Describe what the title *Lord* means in the Bible—especially what is meant by the English word *LORD* in the Bible.
5. Frame says: "The main meaning of the name *Lord* is that he is the head of a *covenant*." Discuss.
6. In what senses is God's authority absolute?
7. Frame says: "God rules not only the little things but the big things, too." Give biblical evidence.
8. Give an example from Scripture where you see the *control* aspect of God's lordship.
9. If *control* is about God's might, then *authority* is about God's _____.
10. Give an example from Scripture of God's authority being demonstrated.
11. Why does Frame make *presence* (or *covenant presence*) a necessary part of God's lordship? Why is this significant?
12. What do the terms *transcendence* and *immanence* mean? Describe these, using everyday language.
13. Discuss Frame's statement that "the impersonal reduces to the personal."
14. Why does Frame believe that lordship is the best model for understanding who God is and for organizing a systematic theology?
15. What are the main objections to using lordship as a central organizing principle for systematic theology?

Memory Verses

Ex. 3:13–15: Then Moses said to God, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” God also said to Moses, “Say this to the people of Israel, ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.”

Rev. 21:3–4: And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

Resources for Further Study

In addition to the specific suggestions that I make at the end of each chapter, it will be valuable for the student to compare the discussions here with those of other systematic theologies, such as those of Charles Hodge, Herman Bavinck, Louis Berkhof, Wayne Grudem, Robert Reymond, Douglas Kelly, and Richard Gamble.³

Frame, John M. *DG*. The first seven chapters present a fuller exegetical defense of my triperspectival understanding of divine lordship.

———. *DKG*. This book develops in detail my triperspectival epistemology, in contrast with non-Christian views of knowledge.

3. ED. NOTE. Also those by Joel Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, and Robert Letham.