John Frame's Theology of Life
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J. Cameron Fraser* email: sosbooks@ymail.com

**J. Cameron Fraser currently serves the Christian Reformed Church in Southern Alberta and Saskatchewan in various capacities that include administration (as stated clerk), preaching and mentoring. He also works part-time with Streets Alive Mission in Lethbridge, Alberta. He has authored several books, the latest of which is* Learning from Lord Mackay: Life and Work in Two Kingdoms.

Karl Barth is reported to have said somewhere that most of the pastors in the German Reformed Church of his day were frustrated systematic theology professors. This caricature, if somewhat exaggerated, has at least a grain of truth to it. It also applies beyond Germany. The most coveted and respected positions in the theological world are in the academy, then come prestigious city pastorates, followed by smaller suburban and rural ones. For those who don't succeed in these arenas, there is always the foreign mission field.

John Frame, one of the most outstanding Reformed theologians of our day, reversed these priorities in terms of his ministry goals, while settling somewhat reluctantly for seminary teaching. He first aspired to foreign mission work, then to pastoral ministry, but finding himself to be temperamentally unsuited to both, he became a seminary professor, to the lasting benefit of the church universal. In *Theology of My Life,* he offers a personal reflection on how this came about. The book comes with a seven-page foreword by one of Frame's more gifted students, Andrée Sue Peterson, now well known as a columnist with WORLD magazine.

Early Years

John McElphatrick Frame was born in Pittsburgh in 1939, the eldest of four. His father worked for Westinghouse Electric, retiring in 1973 as the company's Director of Labor Relations. He died of leukemia in 1980. John's mother was a talented actress and musician who studied at the University of Wisconsin but did not graduate due to financial restraints during the Great

Depression. Following her marriage, she was a "homemaker and occasional volunteer worker. Early on she acted in community theater" (p. 2). She was John's first piano teacher and taught him to read and write before he started school, to which he attributes his early academic success.[1] She died in 1996.

Academic success was a priority to John's parents, spiritual nurture less so.[2] It was an age when the church was still respected and pastors' views appeared in newspapers. John's parents "thought that the kids should have a religious education" (p. 3). Thus, John attended Sunday School at the Edgewood Presbyterian Church and, from the age of six resulting from a move, at Beverly Heights United Presbyterian Church, where he developed the reputation of being "the worst-behaved kid in the class" (p. 4).

Music played a big part in John's life from an early age. He took first piano, then organ lessons, which led to his being asked to play at various church functions. He loved playing hymns and eventually had to face the question: "How could I lead the church in singing these wonderful songs without believing their message" (p. 8)? It was not that he ever disbelieved. This was before the Supreme Court declared prayer and religious education to be unconstitutional in schools. The general perception was that the church taught about the Bible, whereas the public school taught about the world in general, and there was no reason to question either.

Beverly Heights was an evangelical congregation in what was then the United Presbyterian Church. It joined the Evangelical Presbyterian Church a few years ago. As a young teenager, John came under the influence of successive youth pastors who encouraged him to make his faith personal. He also attended a Billy Graham crusade where some of his friends "went forward" and subsequently led changed lives. A seminary student was invited to give a Graham-like gospel message to the church's youth group. He urged them to have a *personal* relationship with Christ. When those who trusted Jesus as their *personal* Lord and Savior were invited to raise their hands, John Frame did so. Reflecting back on that experience, he notes that "whether my new birth took place that night or some time before, I was by age fourteen a follower of Jesus Christ. Church was not a game anymore, not a mere social club. Christ was truly the center of my life. God had sought me out (John 4:23) and had found me" (p. 10).

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[1] Socially awkward and athletically challenged, John excelled in academics. "When I was in first grade, sixth graders would bring their geography texts to me and I would read them fluently (without of course understanding them very well). Eventually the teachers put me at my own table in the classroom and gave me more advanced books to read, 'enrichment' projects to keep me interested" (6).

[2] At one point in the book, Frame mentions his father having been an elder at Beverly Heights United Presbyterian Church. This comes as a surprise, given what is written earlier about him. If there was a spiritual change, it is not mentioned.

Student Days

Frame's parents played a significant role in his choice of college, as well as in other life decisions. They arranged visits to Princeton, Yale and "the smaller (but still elite) colleges of Williams and Amherst." In the end, he was accepted by all four and chose Princeton where he majored in philosophy and wrote a thesis on, "Spinoza, Ontological Proof and Faith." He sought to demonstrate that "the ontological argument for the existence of God was really a way of declaring one's presuppositional values, and therefore of confessing one's faith." In this he was reflecting the influence of Cornelius Van Til to whose works he had been introduced by Donald Fullerton of the Princeton Evangelical Fellowship (of whom more later). He was also helped by the reading of C.S. Lewis, especially *Mere Christianity* and *Miracles: A Preliminary Study*. Frame notes that "Van Til was not fond of C.S. Lewis. But in effect he broadened Lewis's argument in *Miracles*, arguing that all debates on all matters, not only debates about miracles, depended on assumed worldviews (presuppositions)" (p. 42). This helped Frame understand that the arguments of unbelieving professors (in particular, militantly atheistic Walter Kaufmann) were themselves based on presuppositions. Van Til also argued that "non-Christian presuppositions make coherent thought impossible. And of course, to think as Christians, we needed to think on the presupposition of Scripture" (p. 42). So, Frame concludes, "God renewed my confidence in the Bible through Van Til's ministry to me." James I. Packer's *Fundamentalism and the Word of God* also "played a major role in my thinking at this early point…Like Van Til, Packer was saying that even our reasoning must be subject to the lordship of Christ" (p. 42).

One significant detail in Frame's account of his Princeton studies was a metaphysics course with G. Dennis O'Brien. O'Brien dealt in some depth with three thinkers: Aristotle, Spinoza, and John Dewey.

> Aristotle defended a metaphysics of *things*, Spinoza a metaphysics of *facts*, and Dewey a metaphysics of *processes*. The positions of these men were in disagreement. But the disagreements were not over facts, O'Brien thought, but over ways with the facts…So it was almost as if Aristotle, Spinoza, and Dewey were saying the same thing from three different perspectives. At this point, 'perspectivalism' entered my philosophical vocabulary" (p. 43-44).

In later years, 'perspectivalism' would become the hallmark of his teaching and writing, although as we shall see, he meant something quite different by it.

In general, Frame's major courses in philosophy were "outstanding" (p. 39). He makes only a passing reference to a course in "Recent and

Contemporary Empirical Philosophy," adding somewhat cryptically "but I did not get excited about Wittgenstein until some years later" (p. 40). Very little is said about Wittgenstein in the remainder of the memoir, but at least in methodology and especially in his grading system with its attention to the meaning of words, Frame's later teaching suggested the influence of Wittgenstein's language analysis.

In the course of his first semester at Princeton, Frame sought out the spiritual influence of Donald B. Fullerton, D.D., a Princeton graduate of 1913 who, after years of missionary service followed by teaching at what is now Shelton College, started the Princeton Evangelical Fellowship. Fullerton was a Dispensationalist who "straddled the fence" on the issues of Calvinism and Arminianism but stressed the lordship of Christ, which was to become another central feature of Frame's future teaching career.

Fullerton recommended Van Til's writings on Barth and shared the view that Barth's neo-orthodoxy was another form of liberalism concealed under orthodox terminology. He also admired J. Gresham Machen for his stand against liberalism in the Presbyterian Church. He respected Westminster Seminary (founded in 1929 by Machen), but did not recommend it, as it was not dispensational and premillennial. Frame, however, chose Westminster, mainly because of the help he had received from Van Til. He had also read E.J. Young's *Thy Word is Truth* and Ned Stonehouse's biography of Machen.

Frame's parents objected to his choice, preferring the more prestigious (liberal) seminaries of Princeton, Yale, and Union in New York. Ever the obedient son, Frame offered the newly founded Fuller Seminary in California as a compromise, but his father, on being advised that Fuller, Yale, Princeton and Union were "all good seminaries," opted for the more "prestigious" ones and threatened the loss of financial support if John did not choose one of them. At this point, Frame asserted his "manhood," dropped the compromise, and chose Westminster even if it meant working his way through. However, he found that his parents' "own generosity defeated their plan to cut me off financially" (p. 55).

At Westminster (hereafter WTS), Frame finally had the opportunity to study directly under Van Til. He was also introduced to Herman Dooyeweerd and "Dooyeweerdianism" through the teaching of Van Til's associate, Robert D. Knudsen. In general, through his fellow-students, Frame was introduced to the "truly Reformed," who were often (although not always) of Dutch ancestry and were sometimes called "the Dutchmen," whatever their actual ancestry. These "truly Reformed"

> towed the theological party line meticulously. They also observed a kind of lifestyle that was assumed to be authentically Reformed, which included smoking and drinking and avoided too many expressions of piety like chapel services, prayer meetings, evangelistic adventures, and such. They derided those whom they thought were too emotional about their faith… (p. 67).

These included "fundamentalists" and "evangelicals" who had often come to faith at secular or broadly evangelical colleges and practiced their faith in diametrically opposite ways. A number of them came from the South. Frame was early identified as a "fundie," since he did not smoke or drink and attended chapel regularly. However, he also maintained a high grade point average in his courses, "which fundies were not supposed to do" (p. 68).

Frame was also introduced to the meticulous exegesis of John Murray's approach to systematic theology.

> Students at WTS often said that they had come to the seminary to study with Van Til, but they had stayed to study with John Murray…. Murray was to me a wonderful surprise…. If WTS had taught systematics as many Reformed seminaries had done, by expounding the confessions and the classic Reformed theologians, I would have resisted, and I could easily have graduated an Arminian or dispensationalist. But John Murray's approach was to list Bible proof-texts for each doctrine (and the problem texts emphasized by that doctrine's opponents) and exegete them meticulously in his deep Scottish brogue, so that there could be no question of what the Scriptures taught (p. 61-62).

Although Frame does not say so, Murray also provided an antidote to the tension between the "truly Reformed" and "fundies" at Westminster. He was respected by both factions, as well as his colleagues, although always considered to be somewhat different. He was no "fundie" and enjoyed a good cigar as much as any "Dutchman," but he breathed an air of profound piety that reflected his Scots Highland-Puritan background, a form of Reformed piety closer to that of the "Old Princeton" of the Hodges and Warfield than anything otherwise present at WTS in those days. Murray also, through the influence of Gerhardus Vos his teacher at Princeton, and his (Vos's) approach to biblical theology that undergirded Murray's exegetical approach to systematics, combined the best of the Dutch Reformed tradition with his own.[3]

A biblical-theological approach carried over into the practical theology department through Edmund Clowney's emphasis that "a sermon should be mainly devoted to showing how its text advances the redemptive narrative. The preacher should not use Bible characters as moral examples (what Clowney called 'moralism') but should show how they anticipate or reflect Christ in his redemptive work" (p. 57). Frame notes that he did not entirely agree with Clowney's critique of moralism, since the Bible itself presents

[3] Vos's influence also pervaded the entire program at Westminster. Indeed, it could be said that the two major influences at Westminster were the Dutchmen Vos and Van Til, but neither fit the caricature described above.

characters in its stories as examples of faithful or unfaithful living. "Certainly there is no contradiction between advancing the redemptive-historical narrative and presenting characters as moral examples" (p. 57). Despite this disagreement, Frame remembers that Clowney's own sermons "typically moved me more than any others, because they remarkably directed my attention to Christ, the lord of the word" (p. 57).[4]

All in all, WTS "was a great theological feast" (p. 55). Having gained a solid theological foundation there, and as winner of the Westminster Graduate Fellowship for having the highest grade point average, Frame was now ready, much to his parents' relief, to pursue doctoral studies at a "respectable" seminary. Of three options, he chose Yale. He wanted his dissertation to be "the beginning of a new movement against the presuppositions of theological liberalism" (p. 82). So, he thought he would "examine all the arguments used by liberal theologians to oppose propositional revelation, and refute them" (p. 82). However, the dissertation became unmanageable and was never completed. Instead, Frame graduated with a M. Phil. based on two years of graduate courses and completion of the comprehensive doctoral exams. He had also served as a teaching assistant in the Department of Philosophy, although not with great success.

These student years were interspersed with worship and ministry at his home church, summer pastoral internships (while at WTS), and overseas travels (while at Princeton) including L'Abri Fellowship in Switzerland and Africa (with visits to the headquarters of the African Inland Mission and the Sudan Interior Mission). All of these experiences reinforced Frame's conviction that he was not called to the pastorate or the mission field. He left Yale in a spirit of disappointment, thinking he had taken a wrong turn and not knowing where to go next. But then WTS called.

Teaching at Westminster (Philadelphia)

When Frame had been a student at WTS, the widespread assumption was that Norman Shepherd was the natural successor to John Murray in Systematic Theology. Indeed Shepherd, who had been doing graduate studies with G. C. Berkouwer at the Free University of Amsterdam, did return to teach, but first in the New Testament department, following the death of Ned B. Stonehouse. Frame took a course with Shepherd on New Testament Biblical Theology. Later, following Murray's retirement, Shepherd moved to the Systematics department. He needed help and so reached out to Frame who, following a successful faculty interview, became his associate.

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[4] In my own student days, I recall Frame joking with reference to Clowney's *Preaching and Biblical Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1956), that he himself might one day write a book called *Preaching and Systematic Theology.* That day has not yet come, and is unlikely to, since Frame does not consider preaching to be one of his strengths, and says his wife agrees!

Frame soon developed a reputation as a "boy wonder" (because of his youthful looks) and for his perspectival approach to the courses he taught. He defined theology as "the application of Scripture by persons to every area of life" (p. 94). Following Murray's example, he sought to base his pedagogy on a direct interaction with Scripture rather than with other past and present theologians. But it was Van Til who got him thinking about approaching each doctrine of Scripture from three perspectives. Van Til, in his *Christian-Theistic Ethics,* distinguished between the goal, the motive, and the standard of Christian behaviour. For Frame these became the situational, existential and normative perspectives. Further, as perspectivalism migrated from Ethics to the Doctrine of God, "We have a goal because God is in *control*. The *motives* of our inner subjectivity are ethically important, because God has made us in his image, to be his temples. That is, our inward life, our heart is a dwelling place of God, a place for his *presence*. And the *standard* of ethics is nothing other than God's own word, especially that set forth in Scripture. That standard expresses his *authority*. So I had a second triad, based on three characteristics of God: his control, authority, and presence" (p. 96). This led to a study of the concept of *lordship* in the Bible and thus to a theology of lordship expressed triperspectivally. This approach came to be expressed in all of Frame's teaching and later in his published works. At times he wonders if this is a truth deeply embedded in the nature of the Trinity, and he has recently published an explanation and defense of triperspectivalism that takes this position.[5] At other times, he has been content "to regard it as a helpful pedagogical structure or narrative, a set of hooks on which the student can place various biblical doctrines" (p. 97). As such, perhaps, it functions somewhat similarly to the traditional three-point method of preaching, which I confess I have not been able to master any more than I have Frame's perspectivalism.

In later years, Frame was to develop a close friendship and working relationship with Vern Poythress, who came to teach New Testament in 1976 and developed a similar "multiperspectival" approach. Although they no longer teach at the same seminary, Frame and Poythress cooperate in a joint blog "John Frame & Vern Poythress: Triperspectival Theology for the Church" (*www.frame-poythress.org*). Included in the many books and articles listed there is Frame's "Primer on Perspectivalism."

One of the things Frame most appreciated about WTS, both as a student and a teacher, was its commitment to "creativity within the bounds of orthodoxy." Its faculty did not merely pass on the Reformed tradition (as Hodge had boasted Princeton did, teaching nothing new). It was and is thoroughly Reformed, but its professors were encouraged to find new ways of

[5] *Theology in Three Dimensions: A Guide to Triperspectivalism and Its Significance (*Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2017).

expressing that tradition, rooted in the redemptive-historical approach to biblical exegesis and in Van Til's challenging of traditional apologetic methods. Murray's and Van Til's names were foremost in this creative orthodoxy, but another who particularly impressed Frame was Meredith G. Kline, whose research into extra biblical suzerainty treaties shed light on the biblical covenants. Kline taught the "framework hypothesis" of creation rather than the day-age view of E.J. Young. (Kline also differed with Murray on the nature of the biblical covenants and the so-called covenant of works. He eventually left Westminster to teach at Gordon-Conwell Seminary but did return in later years as a guest lecturer, and he also became a colleague of Frame's at Westminster in California (hereafter WTSC). Jay Adams joined the faculty in 1968 to teach preaching but became known for his "nouthetic" view of biblical counseling, with its antithetical approach to secular psychology, which Frame (and Adams) saw as an application of Van Tillian principles. (Later, Harvie Conn would apply the same principles, along with those of biblical theology, to missional issues such as contextualization.)

"Creativity within the bounds of orthodoxy," however, can lead to conflict and controversy. In his article, "Machen and His Warrior Children," Frame documents some of those that predated his own teaching career. The first major conflict in which he became personally involved was not with colleagues but rather students who had been influenced by the philosophy of Herman Dooyeweerd (hence "Dooyeweerdianism"). In this book, Frame nowhere defines Dooyeweerdianism, but he does in a number of other writings, including in *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology.*

Dooyeweerd made a sharp distinction between pretheoretical (or naïve) experience and theoretical thought. "Pretheoretical experience sees the world as a whole. Theory abstracts various aspects of this world for close study, but is in danger of losing connections, the sense of coherence and wholeness. Further, theory is in danger of considering itself *autonomous*."[6] Theoretical thought, according to Dooyeweerd, consists of no less than fifteen modal aspects or law spheres, from the lowest (numerical) to the highest (faith).

Dooyeweerd and Van Til were friends and collaborators, both saw themselves as developing the legacy of Abraham Kuyper; but they parted company over Dooyeweerd's understanding of the Word of God. As Frame explains it, for Dooyeweerd, "the Word of God is a supratemporal reality that speaks to the human heart in a realm beyond all theory and concept. Scripture, however, is a temporal book. It is directed toward the faith aspect, studied by the science of theology…. Scripture's focus on faith is exclusive, so that Scripture may not address the concerns of other spheres…The disturbing conclusion that I reach from all of this is that for Dooyeweerd, revelation…does not direct the philosopher or the scientist in any propositional

[6] John Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology* (P & R Publishing Co., 2015), 518.

way…Dooyeweerd never thought through in a theologically responsible way what Scripture teaches about itself. So his philosophy has not succeeded in avoiding the dangers of autonomy. In fact, it has been something of a regression from Kuyper's vision of God's Word embracing all of life" (p. 521).

Disciples of Dooyeweerd charged traditional Reformed theology (including Frame's) with being "scholastic" and "dualistic." Eventually they founded the Institute of Christian Studies in Toronto, and "their very young faculty scoured North America, seeking to radicalize young Reformed people to embrace their cause." Frame asserts, "I was not willing to accept passively the assimilation of the Reformed movement to a group of young militants. Eventually, I became myself a somewhat militant opponent of Doyeweerdianism." However, by 1975 "the controversy calmed down, after some peacemaking on both sides…. Students attracted to Dooyeweerd tended to attend the Institute for Christian Studies rather that WTS, and when they came to WTS they sought to learn from us rather than to attack our position. The issues became matters of academic discussion rather than grounds for institutional warfare." (p. 109)

As the Dooyeweerdian controversy died down, another erupted and was to be all-consuming for a number of years. John Murray's successor Norman Shepherd began to teach that "we are justified either by faith or works, as long as we regard them as *instruments* but not as grounds of justification. The ground of justification is the righteousness of Christ alone" (p. 112). Shepherd subsequently refined and modified his position. By the time I took his course on the Holy Spirit in 1977, he was teaching that we are justified *in the way of* faith and obedience, citing Paul's teaching on the obedience of faith and faith working through love. He also rejected the language of instrumentation as a holdover from Aristotelean philosophy. Some on the faculty and in his presbytery, however, charged him with compromising the Reformed doctrine of justification by grace through faith, since the concept of works implied merit. Shepherd, for his part, saw himself as opposing the concepts of "cheap grace" and "easy believism" rampant in evangelicalism.

As Frame puts it, Shepherd "rejected the popular theory that James takes *justified* in a very different sense from Paul. Rather…James understands justification as Paul does, as that which makes us right with God, justification in the 'forensic' sense. The conclusion that we should take from James…is that we are justified by a faith that works. A faith that doesn't work is a dead faith, that is, no faith at all" (p. 114)

My own view was and is that Shepherd was attempting to do with justification what John Murray did with sanctification. Murray wrote a ground-breaking article on what he called "Definitive Sanctification," pointing out that sanctification is used in the New Testament not only in a progressive sense, as traditionally understood, but to affirm that believers are set apart as already

holy in Christ.[7] Although some would deny it, this seems not unlike the Pentecostal distinction between positional and progressive sanctification.

Shepherd, it seemed to me, was attempting to do the same with justification. But he lacked Murray's precision and regularly changed his language, leading to further confusion. Frame saw Shepherd's teaching as similar to the adage that "it's faith alone that saves, but the faith that saves is never alone" and consistent with the wording of the Westminster Confession of Faith 11. 2. But Shepherd went further and drew an inference that "since works are a necessary element of saving faith, and since saving faith is necessary to justification, works are therefore necessary to justification" (p. 114). The word "necessary" became a sticking point, and because Shepherd refused to drop it, the controversy raged on and ultimately led to his dismissal, not because he was found to be teaching heresy, but essentially to bring the matter to a close and stop the loss of financial support it had caused.

Frame opines, "There did not seem to be any likely way to end the controversy. In every vote that was taken in faculty, in the board, and in the presbytery, Norman was vindicated or at least not condemned. But his opponents were never willing to be quiet. So the end of one phase of the controversy was the beginning of another. I believe the seminary's decision to fire him in 1982 was unjust. However, it's hard to imagine the controversy being resolved in any other way" (p. 116).

Frame does not say anything at this point in his book about his other systematics colleague, Robert (Bob) Strimple. He does mention Strimple later in his (Strimple's) administrative role as president of WTSC. In some respects, Strimple could lay claim to being John Murray's true successor. He was (and presumably is) a painstakingly careful exegete of Scripture unencumbered by overarching dogmatic (as in Shepherd) or philosophical (as in Frame) considerations.

Another controversy, that was church rather than seminary related, was on how to address the issue of abortion. Around 1970 Frame was appointed by the Orthodox Presbyterian General Assembly to a committee to study the matter. This was before the 1973 *Roe v Wade* Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion nationally, but many individual states had already done so. Frame chaired the committee and was the main author of the ensuing majority report that was presented to the 1971 General Assembly. Controversy ensued. A number of commissioners argued that the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) did not believe in making statements on "political and social issues" (p. 110). In the end, however, the seriousness of the issue warranted an exception and the following year the report was approved and published one year before *Roe v. Wade*.

Frame's report became a standard in pro-life literature. It is clearly dated in terms of current issues such as embryo research, but the exegetical work is

[7] John Murray, "Definitive Sanctification," in *Calvin Theological Journal,* April 1967.

timeless, careful and convincing. For instance, Frame convincingly argues that the passage in Exodus 21:22-25 often used to argue for a lesser status for the unborn on the assumption that it refers to a miscarriage should instead be understood as referring to a premature birth. Following a thorough exegesis of all relevant passages (e.g. Psalm 51:5, Psalm 139:13, Jeremiah 1:5, Luke 1: 41, 44, Luke 2:21 etc.), the report concludes that while it cannot be conclusively argued from Scripture that the embryo/fetus is a human person from conception, "the Christian is under scriptural obligation *to act on the assumption that* the unborn is a person from conception." [8]

Paul Woolley, late Professor of Church History at WTS, dissented from the majority report. While agreeing with it in the main, he found it to be a piece of "rationalistic folly" to propose that

> a fertilized egg is, from the moment of fertilization, a human person. It may possess the potentiality of becoming a person. It is to be noted that the majority report is too wise to do this. But it affirms that the Christian is under scriptural obligation to act as though this were the case. This is even worse. It is at this point that the Christian is compelled to differ with the majority report. [9]

Although Woolley's position was a minority one on both the committee and the General Assembly, I would judge it to have been the evangelical consensus up to that time. Prior to *Roe v Wade*, abortion was generally considered to be a "Catholic" issue. A turning point was the Koop-Shaeffer film series, "Whatever Happened to the Human Race?" that premiered in Philadelphia in 1979.

Besides these public debates, Frame experienced conflict with the OPC congregation that he had come to think of as his home church. Through the influence of an elder of Dutch Reformed background, Covenant OPC in Blue Bell (outside Philadelphia) began to become more "truly Reformed" with an emphasis on church discipline, psalm singing, and opposition to choirs and solos in public worship. In Frame's view the church "had decided, in effect, to become a Dutch museum piece rather than to carry out the Great Commission in its neighbourhood." Then,

> there was a fateful Saturday a few weeks before my departure for California, when two elders came to my home around 10 AM and talked with me into the afternoon. Their message…was that because I did not support the church's position…and because my teaching in the church

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[8] *Report of the Committee to Study the Matter of Abortion: Presented to the Thirty-Eighth General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, May 24-29, 1971* (Philadelphia, PA: The Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1971), 14.

[9] Paul Woolley, "Report of the Committee to Study the Matter of Abortion: The Report of the Minority" in *Ibid*., 22.

> did not seem orthodox to them, I was not in their view truly Reformed. After I left…they would do what they could to erase my influence from the congregation. There would no longer be a choir, and people would be instructed that my teaching was of a non-Reformed character. (p. 121).

Frame was devastated.

Teaching at Westminster (California)

Some people thrive on controversy. John Frame does not. Reserved and peaceful by nature, he prefers to avoid it. This was part of his reason for leaving WTS in Philadelphia to help establish a new seminary in Escondido, California. There he also became involved with a church plant, New Life Church, modelled on the church by the same name in the Philadelphia area pastored by Jack Miller, who also taught in the Practical Theology department at the seminary. Dick Kaufmann, a protégé of Miller's became the founding pastor and led its ministry for a number of years before moving to work with Tim Keller in New York.

Frame was in charge of the music ministry. "New Life worship" had become known in the OPC for its blended worship, including contemporary Christian music. Although a skilled organist with a preference for classical music, Frame learned to play what he was to call CCM and defended it against critics, in part because much of it uses the actual words of Scripture. This led to the publication of two books, *Worship in Spirit and Truth* and *Contemporary Christian Music*. It also led to further controversy with those who saw these publications as evidence that Frame was not "truly Reformed" and did not subscribe to the regulative principle of worship.

A hugely positive result of the move westward (although not dependent on it) was Frame's marriage in his forties to Mary Grace O'Donnell (née Cummings, from a prominent OPC family). Mary had been previously married and divorced. Frame, who had known her for several years wrote to Mary following her divorce, "originally with the purpose of expressing sadness and promising prayer," (as well as to demonstrate that she was the "innocent" party and thus free to remarry), but in the end "mentioned the possibility of further correspondence with courtship in view." They were married on June 2, 1984.

Mary brought three children into the marriage and there were the predictable early conflicts with hurt and angry children. The Frames sought the counselling help of Jay Adams, who was now a colleague in Escondido, as he had previously been in Philadelphia. It was the birth of two sons of their own that "decisively made us a family" (p. 134). Mary by all accounts was and is a remarkable blessing. Besides caring for her husband and children, she opened her home to the homeless, introducing her new husband to practical forms of ministry which he financed but did not feel naturally suited to. The homeless ministry, however, brought discomfort to the children and so was

discontinued when the Frames later moved to Orlando, Florida and Reformed Theological Seminary. Mary also homeschooled her children, a practice similarly discontinued in Orlando.

Frame's early years at WTSC were happy ones that finally afforded him the time to write books and articles, his first major project being the publication of *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (1987). This was to be the first of four volumes in what came to be known as Frame's Lordship series, centred around the theme of divine lordship and expressed in terms of his triperspectival model. The remaining volumes would be published after Frame left WTSC.

Frame describes his early years at Escondido as "Collegiality in California." However, this was not to last, as controversy continued to pursue him. The first was the revival of an old criticism that he wasn't sufficiently faithful to the teachings of Cornelius Van Til, whose presuppositional approach to apologetics had become a litmus test of orthodoxy at WTS in Philadelphia. In California, as Frame shows, it became increasingly less so. He was, however, challenged by a colleague, Meredith G. Kline, who complained that he (Frame) was not sufficiently Van Tillian. After a personal confrontation, Kline pursued his criticism of Frame, writing a letter to President Robert Strimple, which Strimple treated with "benign neglect." The discussion stopped for a few years, but then Frame began to hear suspicions from some students about the orthodoxy of his own teaching and suspected that Kline was behind these suspicions. Frame discusses them in some detail. From Kline's point of view, Frame was not only insufficiently Van Tillian, he was too close to Norman Shepherd on justification and Greg Bahnsen on theonomy, both of whom Kline strongly opposed. Frame had admired Kline's "creativity within the bounds of orthodoxy" in Old Testament studies but now found that he "had come to routinely oppose such creativity in others, at least when they differed with his ideas" (p. 152).

However, while Kline found Frame to be not sufficiently Van Tillian, some of Frame's students began to find him *too* Van Tillian, or at least that his positions and arguments "were not sufficient to deal with the objections to presuppositionalism" and his "teaching methods were not helpful in preparing students to be good apologists" (p. 153). These criticisms were made publicly during a lecture in the Modern Mind course. Frame tried to respond with his customary grace, but he was naturally devastated. (He does admit that this incident occurred during a period of decline in mental sharpness, as he was developing symptoms of sleep apnea. As a fellow sufferer I can sympathize!)

Sensing some confusion about his apologetic approach, Frame set himself to review all of Van Til's writings and produced two books, *Apologetics to the*

Glory of God (1994)[10] and *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought*, the latter being published in 1995, the hundredth anniversary of Van Til's birth. Frame does have some differences with Van Til in details of his approach and is more sympathetic to aspects of the "classical" approach than Van Til was, but he remains clearly presuppositional in his basic position. He also has the merit of being extremely clear and readable, whereas Van Til's writings can be obtuse and difficult to understand. (Another unrelated, but important book published during WTSC days, in 1991, was *Evangelical Reunion*.)

Frame describes the rise of what he saw as various factions, including one that raised questions about his commitment to the regulative principle of worship. In his own mind, Frame did not and does not reject the regulative principle but does reject some traditional applications of it. However, his definition of the principle "that everything in worship must have biblical warrant" itself differs from the more restrictive traditional definition "that what is not commanded is forbidden."[11] This original definition has been applied to such issues as musical instruments, choirs, religious holidays and "man-made" hymns – issues that it is difficult to find explicit warrant for in the New Testament. There is, therefore, some basis for accusing Frame of at least holding to a modified version of the regulative principle, but he is far from alone in this among Reformed leaders.

As noted previously, another distinctive of Frame's, following Murray (with whom, incidentally he differed on the regulative principle), has been his commitment to developing theological positions directly from the text of Scripture rather than from historical theology. He has been quite critical of other Reformed theologians (e.g. Berkouwer) on this score and has become severely critical of Westminster in California which has developed in this direction, especially under the presidency of church historian Robert Godfrey. This led to the charge that Frame (along with another colleague) was "unconfessional" because he did not develop his theology from the Reformed confessions. In responding by letter to this criticism, Frame's natural graciousness gave way to "negative reflections on some colleagues and some students by name," for which he later apologized. Despite efforts at reconciliation, the letter "burned all bridges" between Frame and WTSC. Besides, there were rumours that a colleague might be bringing charges against

[10] Since revised and republished as *Apologetics: A Justification of Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2015).

[11] Frame responds, "Yes, it differs from it verbally. But 'command' is not, I think, significantly different from 'warrant,' unless you think that a command must be 'explicit.' And most people who insist on the language of 'commands' do not insist on explicitness, but engage in considerable theological inference from biblical texts. In that practice of inference, they depart from the idea of explicitness. I have thought that what they were seeking, therefore, is better expressed by the term 'warrant' (Email correspondence, February 26, 2018).

Frame for his doctrine of the Trinity.[12] It was time to seek employment elsewhere.

Teaching at Reformed Seminary (Orlando)

The last chapter of Frame's memoir is titled, "Winsomely Reformed at RTS." This is a reference to Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida (one of several branches from the original RTS in Jackson, Mississippi). It was here that Frame happily ended his teaching career with retirement in 2017 at the age of 77. Before landing at RTS, Frame gave serious consideration to joining the faculty of Trinity Evangelical School of Theology (TEDS) in Deerfield, Illinois (a suburb of Chicago). This raised the intriguing question of whether he was better suited to being a Reformed influence in a broadly evangelical seminary, where he would have some Reformed, but not Presbyterian or paedobaptist colleagues like D.A. Carson and John Woodbridge. Other Reformed scholars at TEDS were former students of Frame's (Wayne Grudem, Kevin Vanhoozer, Willem VanGemeren.) In the end, Frame's interest in TEDS foundered on the need to either subscribe to its premillennial statement of faith or else go through some process that would allow him to take exception to it.

After a fairly lengthy process that involved checking out schools and churches as well as the seminary, the Frames left their "paradise lost" in California for another paradise in Orlando. Family and church life thrived, as did Frame's teaching and writing career. He found the students at RTS to be "wonderful" (p. 203) and enjoyed genuine collegiality with a number of faculty, including some old friends who were genuinely committed to being "winsomely Reformed." The move to Orlando also inaugurated "the most fruitful time" of Frame's life in writing and publishing. The second volume of his Lordship series, *Doctrine of God*, although already written before the move, was released in 2002. Shorter writings followed. A popular introduction to theology, *Salvation Belongs to the Lord*, was published in 2006*, Doctrine of the Christian Life* in 2008 and *Doctrine of the Word of God* in 2010, which of all of his books is the one Frame likes best. A Festschrift in his honour, *Speaking the Truth in Love*, to which he personally contributed, was published in 2009. 2012 saw the publication of *The Academic Captivity of Theology*, a development of a much earlier "Proposal for a New Seminary" that advocated

[12] Frame doesn't say why such a serious charge might be brought against him, but explained in personal correspondence that it was because of his defense of Van Til's unusual formulation, "one person, three persons"
(email, December 16, 2017) What Van Til meant by this, which seems hardly unorthodox, is that the God who exists as three persons is a personal being, not an impersonal sum of the three persons.

a less academic and more community-based approach to theological education.[13]

Frame's massive *Systematic Theology* (2013), with a laudatory foreword by J. I. Packer and a multitude of endorsements, is in one sense "a summation of all my work in systematic theology" (p. 211)[14]. His *History of Western Philosophy and Theology* (2015) is an expansion of Frame's "lectures for one course in History of Philosophy and Christian Thought" (p. 212) as well as of similar courses at both Westminsters. Three volumes of *Selected Shorter Writings* were published by 2017.

With a few exceptions, all of Frame's books have been published by Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co. in Phillipsburg, NJ. The exceptions include *Evangelical Reunion* (Baker, 1991), *The Academic Captivity of the Church* (Whitefield Media, 2013), the memoir being reviewed here (Cascade Press, 2017) and perhaps his most controversial book, *The Escondido Theology: A Reformed Analysis of Two Kingdom Theology* (Whitefield Media, 2011). This last book is significant in that it represents a deliberate choice to re-enter the waters of controversy by critiquing his former colleagues at WTSC.

The sub-title of the book implies that the theology being critiqued is not "truly Reformed," which is an interesting charge to be made by someone who has opposed claims by others to be the sole champions of authentic Reformed theology. The book is in fact a collection of book reviews, not all of which are

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[13] At least in his early teaching career, Frame was known as a tough marker. He clearly admired academic ability and regularly made the best student papers available for the rest of us to read and learn from. At the same time, he respected those less academically gifted whose ministry gifts were different from his. Over the years, he has been exceedingly kind to a host of students past and present (myself included) who have sought his advice on various issues. Since the advent of email, he has responded quickly and thoroughly without any hint that his valuable time is being infringed on. In this way, he has modelled, at least in part, the kind of community-based training advocated in his "Proposal for a New Seminary."

[14] Frame's *Systematic Theology* is not without its critics. For instance, in an otherwise appreciative review, Kevin DeYoung notes: "I find his thinking deeper and stronger on the doctrine of God, knowledge of God, and word of God (topics on which he's already written at length), then on, say, soteriology or ecclesiology. Frame takes around 400 pages to cover the doctrine of God, with close to another 100 on the knowledge of God, and almost 200 on the word of God, while his sections on the person and work of Christ are only 20 pages respectively, the *ordo salutis* around 75 pages, ecclesiology about 60, and eschatology 25 pages. The 20 pages on the person of Christ are very good–clear and to the point–but they just aren't as developed as some material earlier in the book." DeYoung also finds Frame's triperspectivalism to be "extremely tenuous," although he has friends who find it "extremely enlightening" (November 13, 2013*). Frame responds, "Of course, I do reply to these criticisms in the book itself, for what that reply may be worth"* (Email, February 26, 2018).

directly related to two kingdom theology. In his first chapter, Frame identifies two main issues of concern: a sharp separation between law and gospel and the two kingdoms doctrine. Both doctrines are traditionally associated with Lutheranism more than Calvinism, but among the Escondido theologians they have taken on a somewhat novel bent based on the teachings of Meredith G. Kline, who distinguished between the Mosaic covenant as a covenant of law and the Abrahamic covenant as a covenant of grace; and also, between the Noahic covenant as a covenant with all mankind and the Abrahamic as a redemptive covenant with Israel. Frame also takes exception to the Escondido theologian's reliance on what he calls "historical-confessional" theology. He critiques these perspectives from the point of view of neo-Calvinism as that was developed by Abraham Kuyper and his successors, noting especially Kuyper's famous claim that "there is not one square inch of the entire creation about which Jesus Christ does not cry out, 'This is mine!'"[15]

In his preface, Frame notes that in one sense, he is the worst possible person to take on the task of critiquing the Escondido theology. This is because of his personal history with the theologians he critiques. On the other hand, he may be the best, even the only one so qualified, based on that same experience. He leaves the reader to judge whether or not he is "settling scores here, or criticizing this movement for personal reasons."[16] Despite his attempts to avoid personal criticisms, he does admit to a few and there is an uncharacteristic use of intemperate language, such as that those who teach the views he critiques are a "faction, even a 'sect'" and that "in the end their teaching is harmful to Evangelicalism and Reformed Christianity."[17]

In his memoir, Frame explains that he sent *The Escondido Theology* to his default publisher (P & R), but while it was still under review and time passed, he "came to the view that the book was not a P & R title." For one thing, P & R had published one of the books he criticized and his "critique was so sharp" that "I thought they may have felt under pressure to choose sides."[18] After his seeking the advice of a few friends, the book was eventually published by Whitefield Media Productions in Florida. After the book was published, Frame laments, "the cyberworld exploded with fervent attacks on my writing and my person. I had hoped that the book would lead to some thoughtful discussion about these important issues, but that was not to be."[19]

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[15] Quoted in John Frame, *The Escondido Theology: A Reformed Response to Two Kingdom Theology* (Lakeland, FL: Whitefield Media Productions, 2011), 5.
[16] Ibid, xli.
[17] Ibid., xl
[18] Ibid., 207.
[19] Ibid., 208.

I asked Frame why his memoir was not published by P & R and he replied that he did submit it there, but it was thought to be "too harsh on WTSC and too positive towards RTS."[20] Personally, I found it to be a fascinating read that, among other things, explained his departure from WTSC to RTS. But it does raise questions about the wisdom of naming names and going public with personal disputes. It is natural to want to defend oneself against what one deems to be unfair charges, and Frame was clearly hurt several times by erstwhile friends and colleagues. However, speaking from personal experience on a much smaller scale, defending oneself seldom has beneficial results.

Conclusion

At the outset of this article, we called John Frame one of the most outstanding Reformed theologians of our time. Few would disagree with this. Following the example of John Murray, he based his theology on biblical exegesis rather than interaction with the Reformed tradition. His critics, however, accuse him of paying insufficient attention to that tradition. His impressive *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology* evidences a broad grasp of the Christian tradition in general, including the Reformation, but there is very little attention to the post Reformation period out of which the Reformed confessions emerged. And even there, Frame tends to approach his subject from the perspective of philosophical rather than strictly theological developments. While he (briefly) expresses appreciation for the rise of pietism as a reaction to Protestant scholasticism, there is nothing about the corresponding Puritan movement or such magisterial theologians as John Owen, who combined scholastic methodology with warm-hearted piety. This has reinforced the above criticism.[21]

His own distinctively perspectival approach has its roots in his philosophical studies, tweaked by his study of Van Til. The overall structure of triperspectivalism (normative, situational, existential) is surely helpful in applying biblical teaching to specific situations as experienced in life, but in my opinion it can be overdone when it is found everywhere as Frame tends to do. Thus, I fall somewhere between those who, in Kevin DeYoung's words find it "extremely enlightening" and DeYoung himself who finds it "exceedingly tenuous."

Frame has been a leading expositor of Cornelius Van Til's presuppositional approach to apologetics. He is not uncritical of Van Til and differs with him in some details. This has led to the charge that he is not sufficiently Van Tillian, as for instance in his sympathetic interpretation of C.S. Lewis, of whom Van

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[20] Email, 17 July, 2017.

[21] See, for instance, John V. Fesko, "(Dis)engaging our Reformed Fathers (?): A Review of John Frame's *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology*: A Review Article" in *Ordained Servant: A Journal for Church Officers*, January 2018, https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=669&issue_id=131

Til was dismissive. Frame in turn criticizes those who, in his view, follow Van Til slavishly. Personally, I have found Frame's more practical and pastoral approach to be very helpful, especially in *Apologetics to the Glory of God*. (Since his memoir was published, he has also written *Christianity Considered: A Guide for Skeptics and Seekers,* forthcoming in May of this year.)

Frame has been criticized as less than Reformed in his understanding of and application of the regulative principle of worship. As I read of his troubles with the OPC church in Blue Bell and its movement towards more traditionally Reformed worship, I couldn't help thinking that Frame's mentor, John Murray, would have sided with the Blue Bell elders, although doubtless with more grace. No doubt Frame's musical gifts and background have contributed to his reworking of the regulative principle. At the same time, his defence of contemporary Christian music on biblical grounds despite his personal preference for classical music is evidence of his desire to subject even his personal preferences to biblical scrutiny.

As we saw, Frame was involved in controversy much of his professional life. This went against his retiring and peacemaking nature, but he did not shy away from defending truth or opposing error as he perceived it. He was, however, most at home with the "winsomely Reformed" atmosphere he found at RTS in Orlando. The title of his festschrift *Speaking the Truth in Love* captures well both his love of truth and the pastoral heart with which he approached his academic career. This is surely what makes him an outstanding Reformed theologian.