

Compounding Error: A Review of John Frame's Systematic Theology

© 2024 Daniel H. Chew

Introduction

John Frame has been a major figure in American Reformed circles in the late 20th century, portraying himself as a disciple of Cornelius Van Til and a proponent of his version of presuppositional apologetics. He is a controversial figure in some Reformed circles. Certainly, as a student at Westminster California, Frame was not thought of very well, and he returned the favor in his polemic attacking the so-called “Escondido theology.”¹

That being said, it is helpful to understand one's opponent, and reading the primary sources are the way to do so. It is with this in mind that I have read John Frame's *Systematic Theology*² with as open a mind as possible. Having done so, I would like to offer a review of the work, pointing out certain helpful stuff there, as well as the problems within the book.

Outline

John Frame's *Systematic Theology* stands at a hefty 1149 pages excluding endorsements, forewords, bibliography, and indices. It is split into 12 parts, a brief part 1 as an Introduction to Systematic Theology, Part 2 on the Biblical story, Part 3 on the Doctrine of God, Part 4 on the Doctrine of the Word of God, Part 5 on the Doctrine of the Knowledge of God, Part 6 on the doctrine of angels and demons, Part 7 on the doctrine of man, Part 8 on the doctrine of Christ, Part 9 on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, including salvation, Part 10 on the doctrine of the church, Part 11 on the doctrine of the last things, and Part 12 on the doctrine of the Christian Life. Significantly for a systematic theology, the first five parts cover a whopping 767 pages of the book, and they all have an apologetic thrust to them. To call this book not a standard systematic theology is an understatement, as it does not really cover the stuff systematic theologies tend to cover, but I digress.

In part 1, Frame deals with the issues of what theology is, the most basic of prolegomena for a book on *systematic* theology. Part 2 is strange though as it puts forward redemptive history according to John Frame, certainly not something that is part of systematic theology but rather biblical theology. Part 3 is ostensibly on the Doctrine of God but reads more like an apologetic discourse on God and his attributes. Parts 4 and 5 deals with epistemology and apologetics, while Parts 6 to 12 deals with

¹ John Frame, *The Escondido Theology: A Reformed Response to Two Kingdoms Theology* (Lakeland, FL: Whitefield Media, 2011)

² John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013)

the various facets of Christian doctrine, most of it a basic introduction to these loci of Christian doctrine.

Some positives

Perhaps what is most helpful out of the book is the square (or rectangle) of religious opposition that Frame has drawn, depicting the differences between Christian and non-Christian views of transcendence and immanence, as Figure 1 below³:

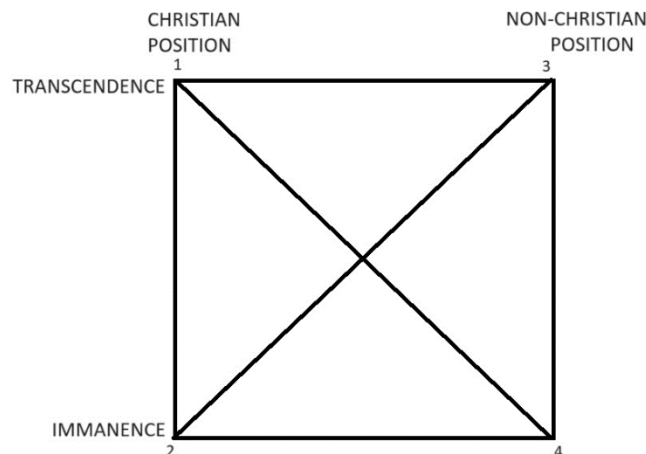


Fig. 1. The square of religious opposition

In this square (or rectangle), the difference between Christian and non-Christian views on transcendence and immanence are stated. As stated in another of Frame's book,⁴

The four corners represent four assertions:

1. God is head of the covenant.
2. God is involved as Lord with His creatures.
3. God is infinitely far removed from the creation.
4. God is identical to the creation.

Assertions 1 and 2 are biblical assertions, 3 and 4 are unbiblical. The first assertion represents a biblical view of divine transcendence, the second a biblical view of divine immanence. The third assertion represents a nonbiblical view of transcendence, the fourth a non-Christian view of immanence. So the two sides distinguish a Christian from a non-Christian approach to the questions of God's immanence and transcendence. The upper half of the square deals with the concept of transcendence, the lower half with immanence. The diagonal lines indicate direct contradictions showing precisely how the two positions differ: 1 asserts that God is distinct from creation as Lord, 4 denies any distinction at all; 2 asserts a meaningful involvement, 3 denies it.

³ Frame, *Systematic*, 45. This version is taken from John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (A Theology of Lordship; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1987), 14-5. Hereafter DKG

⁴ Frame, DKG, 15

This square is helpful precisely because many views of transcendence take transcendence as God being “wholly other,” where for God to have any relation with creation or creatures is seen to be a rejection of various aspects of what it means to be God. Of course, this square alone does not resolve exactly what divine transcendence should look like, but it is a good point to note that God’s transcendence is not an abstract “out there” but rather that He is primarily above creation as Lord.

Along the same vein, Frame’s *Systematic* is strong on precisely the issue he is strong at: Apologetics. Parts 4 and 5 of the book especially can be read with some benefit, although, as I argue, such is not the point of systematic theologies.

Problematic areas and errors

The book however has numerous problems in it, which I am unable to accept no matter how charitable I try to be. The errors are systemic, and cumulatively pose a big problem as to the orthodoxy of its author.

The problem of themes and the central dogma

Frame organized his systematic theology,⁵ and his four-volume work prior to that, according to the theme of “Lordship.”⁶ Frame states that the Bible can be studied according to different themes and much learned from such, but that he focuses on “lordship” because divine lordship is very important in Scripture.⁷ In a certain sense, Frame is correct. Divine lordship is very important in Scripture. The problem is not that divine lordship is not important, but that Frame is elevating it towards the status of a Central Dogma.

A “central dogma” is the idea that there is one single motif whereby theology is to be properly done, that motif being the “central dogma.” Frame is not hereby stating that there are some things we can learn from looking at Scripture under the motif of divine lordship, but rather that Scripture is best understood through using this motif. After all, a book entitled *Systematic Theology* is supposed to be a systematic theology, not a biblical theology of lordship. A systematic theology is meant to systematize theology, and putting one theme above the others is to elevate it akin to the status of a central dogma.

By itself, since divine lordship is indeed important in Scripture, this might not be a major issue. But small deviations cumulatively add up into bigger and bigger problems, as we shall see.

⁵ Frame, *Systematic*, 14-15

⁶ The four volumes are grouped under the series title “A Theology of Lordship”

⁷ Frame, *Systematic*, 15-16

The nature of theology

What is theology all about? Here, we may have a variety of definitions, but Frame's definition is certainly unique. According to Frame, theology is "*the application of Scripture, by persons, to every area of life.*"⁸ Frame rejects Charles Hodge's definition as theology as a "science," with the following reasons:

The job of the theologian cannot be to give the first or more definitive description of Scripture in human language. Why? Because Scripture has already done that.⁹

I am also disturbed by Hodge's statement that theology exhibits the facts of Scripture "in their *proper* order and relation" (emphasis mine). Again, Hodge neglects the fact that Scripture is language as well as fact and that therefore Scripture has already exhibited, described, and explained the facts in an orderly way (cf. Luke 1:3) Why, then, do we need another order?¹⁰

The way out of this bind is to recognize that Scripture is language, that it has its own rational order, that it gives a perfect, normative, rational description and analysis of the facts of redemption. It is not the job of theology to supply such a normative description and analysis; that account has been given *to* theology by revelation. Theology, then, must be *secondary* description, a reinterpretation and reproclamation of Scripture, both of its propositional and of its nonpropositional content. Why do we need such a reinterpretation? *To meet human needs.*¹¹

In other words, Frame thinks that Scripture is THE Systematic Theology of the Christian faith par excellence. The idea of systematizing truth, of stating biblical truth, which is what theology in the Christian tradition has always been considered to be; Scripture itself is. Therefore, there is no reason to order truth around, because Scripture is present and we should not do Scripture's job. Rather, "theology" according to Frame is Practical Theology, an *application* of what Scripture clearly states.

This redefinition of "theology," and it is a redefinition, is troubling because it undermines the nature of Scripture.¹² We believe in the authority of Scripture because Scripture is the norming norm (*normans non normata*). Scripture norms all things, and

⁸ *Ibid.*, 8

⁹ Frame, DKG, 78

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 79

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² In discussing the genus of theology, Francis Turretin states that theology is "mixed (i.e. partly theoretical and partly practical)" [Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (trans. George Musgrave Giger; ed. James T. Tennison, Jr.; Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1992), I.7.6]. In other words, theology has an intellectual component of cognitive learning and understanding, as well as a practical use in life. The understanding that theology as a type of "science" (*scientia*, i.e. knowledge) extends to the continental theologian Herman Bavinck as well [See Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* (ed. John Bolt; trans. John Vriend; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003) I. 45-6], and is not just something peculiar to Charles Hodge. Thus, it can be said that Frame's redefinition finds no grounds in any Reformed theologian before him.

it norms all things because it is the revelation of God.¹³ As Herman Bavinck states, Scripture is the foundation or *principium* of theology,¹⁴ a term which excludes Frame's idea that Scripture is theology itself. Logically also, since Scripture is the full revelation of God, it cannot be a systematic theology. Scripture is the source of theology, not theology itself. What is written is finite; what is revealed must partake of the infinity of the divine revelator. If Scripture is knowledge itself, then revelation is exhausted in 66 books of chapters of words. Rather, because Scripture is the fount of knowledge, countless theologians and exegetes have written thousands of books with millions of pages exploring the [special] revelation of God, unfolding its mysteries for all to read and learn and adore.¹⁵

The historic Reformed definition of theology therefore is valid, because Scripture is not theology. Frame's citing of Luke 1:3 here is likewise invalid because that verse deals with Luke's account of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, not theology! Contrary to Frame, the work of theologizing is not a "secondary description of Scripture," but rather of thinking through biblical revelation and ordering what is revealed into doctrinal topics that are internally coherent and logical.

This redefinition of "theology" to the realm of practical theology would contribute to the many other problems down the line. After all, the focus becomes not "what is true and internally coherent," but rather "is it helpful and applicable." Logical consistency also goes down the toilet, as few if any attempts have been made to reconcile what are clearly logical contradictory positions.

Perspectives and Tri-perspectives

Frame is famous for his tri-perspectivalism, seeing everything along the "normative," "situational" and "existential" perspectives. More broadly, Frame absolutely **loves** triangles, specifically equilateral triangles. To that end, he has even dedicated an appendix detailing the many triads he mentions in his book.¹⁶ In his second volume of the Lordship series, Frame has an appendix dealing with triads in every field he sees including in the secular world.¹⁷ Now, there is nothing necessarily wrong in perceiving things along the "normative," "situational" and "existential" perspectives especially in practical theology, as Dennis Johnson has done in his class on preaching.¹⁸ There is also nothing necessarily wrong in seeing patterns of threes in the world as vestiges of

¹³ "... the word of God is the sole principle of theology." (Turretin, *Institutes*, I.2.1). See also David T. King, *Holy Scripture: The Ground and Pillar of our Faith Volume I: A Biblical Defense of the Reformation Principle of Sola Scriptura* (Battle Ground, WA: Christian Resources, 2001), 130, 181-2

¹⁴ "And it is not simply the case that Holy Scripture is only the norm and not the source of dogmatics, but it is specifically the foundation (*principium*) of theology [Bavinck, I.88].

¹⁵ I omit discussion of Frame's appeal to linguistics because it proves nothing whatsoever about the nature of Scripture and theology.

¹⁶ Frame, *Systematic*, 1118-1124

¹⁷ Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 743-750 (Hereafter DG)

¹⁸ Class notes on WSCAL's PT500 Ministry of the Word, by Dr. Dennis E. Johnson, 2010

the Trinity (*vestigia Trinitatis*), as long as one does not think that is any form of natural theology.¹⁹

The first problem arises precisely because Frame redefines “theology” as practical theology. If “theology” is practical theology, then the whole idea of an absolute normative perspective is corroded, because the focus is on application not on truth. This is made evident in Frame’s discussion about perspectivalism, where all three perspectives are “identical but ‘perspectivally’ related.”²⁰ We need to be careful here to note that Frame is not saying the normative perspective is not normative; it still is. We cannot therefore say that Frame denies the normativity of Scripture; he does not. But rather, because Frame defines theology as application, therefore the “normative” perspective as an application has no epistemic priority. Hence, while Frame’s perspectivalism does not undermine the authority of Scripture, it undermines the availability and utility of that authority, because how “normative” can normative views be if they lack epistemic priority and therefore one can stealthily modify one’s perception of the normative due to its identity with the other perspectives?

The second major problem is the implicit relativism in Frame’s perspectivalism. By making everything about perspectives, and saying that all perspectives are “identical but ‘perspectivally’ related,” Frame is opening Scripture to the legitimacy of any and all forms of interpretation of Scripture. Of course, Frame does not actually think any interpretation of Scripture is valid, as he disagrees with the open theists about their view of God for example. However, this allowance opens the possibility of admitting error by relativizing contradictory interpretations of Scripture and doctrine as merely different “perspectives.” Or, one can argue that since all perspectives are identical, the variation between the normative perspective and the other perspectives should be seen as a problem with one’s interpretation of Scripture and therefore allow other perspectives to in practice become normative over Scripture.

To this, Frame can assert that Scripture is not a plastic nose and his perspectivalism applies only to theology as application. That is technically true, but it runs into the problem that the base meaning of theology as dealing with truth does not actually go away. Further, this sleight of hand makes it appear that Frame is talking out of both sides of his mouth. When it suits him, theology is about truth and therefore open theists are in error. When it does not suit him, theology is application and therefore differences in theology must be regarded as mere differences in “perspectives.” Thus, in Frame’s case this system is functioning as an attempt to obscure his teaching from examination and critique through the claim that everything is “perspectival.”

Frame’s “Biblicism”

¹⁹ It is not proof of natural theology for a simple reason: Nobody apart from Christians who are looking for these vestiges will be able to perceive them.

²⁰ Frame, DKG, 89

What is “Biblicism”? In the current context, “biblicism” is taken as a pejorative, yet there is no consensus in what it means. Many critics have dug up an obscure work by a Roman Catholic priest called Sophei Finngan who in 1827 was the first to use the term.²¹ The provenance might have made this meaning of “biblicism” sticks, except, if the work is actually read, Finngan was using the term as a slur for Protestants in general, with a particular focus on the political conflict of Ireland against Protestant England. If the term “biblicism” is to be used in that manner, then I am sadly afraid all Protestants are “biblicists,” as long as one is a Protestant. Therefore, such a use of the term should be rejected, especially since its use in that manner did not stick.

We should therefore use the term in the way it has been popularized by the church historian David Bebbington, who included it as one of the four characteristics of Evangelicalism (the Bebbington Quadrilateral)²². Building off what Bebbington says of Evangelicalism, in that “creeds and confessions and systematic thought are minimized in favor of the explicit teachings of Scripture,”²³ I have proposed a definition of biblicism derived from Bebbington’s description:²⁴

A view of the Bible that (1) all spiritual truths are found in the Bible, (2) the Bible is clearly understood, (3) creeds, confessions, and systematic thought are less important or unimportant compared to the explicit teachings of Scripture.

Frame in his works focuses on Scripture and denigrates the creeds and confessions as bearers of truth, something which will be discussed further below. But again, we must be careful not to misunderstand Frame’s view. Frame does not say that creeds and confessions are unimportant or that they are to be disrespected. He denigrates the creeds and confessions *as bearers of truth*, but he does not denigrate the creeds and confessions per se. Frame states that “the creeds and confessions of the church are especially important theological sources because they reflect important official agreements on doctrinal issues.”²⁵ Elsewhere, in relation to tradition broadly, Frame wrote,

Similarly, if I am told that my doctrine was held by, say, the Gnostics or the Pelagians, I should rightly worry a bit, and perhaps rethink or even reconsider it.

²⁶

[Church tradition] They must be heard critically; we wish to profit from their mistakes, as well as from their achievements.²⁷

²¹ Sophei Finngan, *The Mania of Seduction Unmasked or, a Scriptural view of the Rise, Progress and Decline of Biblicism* (Cork, 1827)

²² D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (New York, NY: Taylor and Francis; 2005. Kindle Edition)

²³ *Ibid.*, 143.

²⁴ As stated in my article Daniel H Chew, “We have the prophetic word made more sure: Natural Theology, Hermeneutics and *Sola Scriptura*,” *Reformed Energies*. Accessed 31 May 2024 (https://puritanreformed.net/theology/Steffaniak_Response.pdf)

²⁵ Frame, *Systematic*, 9

²⁶ Frame, DKG, 284

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 304

Indeed, a creed is quite inescapable, though some people talk as if they could have “only the Bible” or “no creed but Christ.”²⁸

In order to more fully understand Frame’s position on the creeds and confessions, we can turn to Frame’s article on the topic of biblicism. In his article *In Defense of Something Close to Biblicism: Reflections on Sola Scriptura and History in Theological Method*,²⁹ Frame denies being a biblicist, though he says that he comes close to it because of his adherence to *Sola Scriptura*. According to Frame, biblicism is defined as:

(1) someone who has no appreciation for the importance of extrabiblical truth in theology, who denies the value of general or natural revelation, (2) those suspected of believing that Scripture is a “textbook” of science, or philosophy, politics, ethics, economics, aesthetics, church government, etc., (3) those who have no respect for confessions, creeds, and past theologians, who insist on ignoring these and going back to the Bible to build up their doctrinal formulations from scratch, (4) those who employ a “proof texting” method, rather than trying to see Scripture texts in their historical, cultural, logical, and literary contexts.

Frame rejects all four definitions of “biblicism” he gave. Concerning definition (3), Frame’s rejection is stated as being that the Reformers set out to reform and not reject the teachings of the church. Therefore, as long as there is no rejection of the teaching of the church but a critical appraisal, theological innovation and questioning the tradition is fine and not biblicistic.

A short digression is in order here, as Frame has asserted that Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia and California have been working on theological innovation ever since their founding. The problem with Frame’s brief argument is that he has not shown an understanding of the distinction between “doctrinal development” and “theological innovation.”³⁰ Both will lead to the production of something that looks new and fresh, but doctrinal development does not seek to create something totally new but to express the same truths in a more developed or a more contextual form, whereas theological innovation is unmoored from the past. We will look more at Frame’s theological innovations later, but suffice it is now to say that Frame does not seem to understand that doctrinal development is not the same as theological innovation, and that showing that there are differences and seemingly “new things” is not the same as showing proof of theological innovation.

From all these, we can piece together Frame’s view as it relates to historic Bebbingtonian biblicism as I have previously articulated. Frame’s view is that the

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 305

²⁹ John Frame, “In Defense of Something Close to Biblicism: Reflections on Sola Scriptura and History in Theological Method,” Frame-Poythress.org, June 4, 2012. Accessed 31 May 2024 (<https://frame-poythress.org/in-defense-of-something-close-to-biblicism-reflections-on-sola-scriptura-and-history-in-theological-method/>)

³⁰ For a book looking at doctrinal development in the church, see M. Eugene Osterhaven, *The Faith of the Church: A Reformed Perspective on its Historical Development* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982)

creeds and confessions are really good guides, but only that: guides. Frame rejects the view that creeds and confessions have any norming authority for either the individual Christian or the church. Frame will reference the creeds and confessions, but he does not think himself bound to them in any doctrinal sense (though ecclesiastically maybe, but we will discuss that later). They are not *norma normata*, the normed norm, secondary standards that facilitate one's growth in Christian truth, but mere reference material in the same way BDAG is a reference material for Greek lexical studies.

How does using Creeds and Confessions as *norma normata* function as opposed to the approach of biblicism? When researching a topic, using Creeds and Confessions as *norma normata* means that the views taught in them are treated as the default view. If one, after much research and thinking and ruminating on Scripture, think that the Creeds and Confessions are wrong on the topic, then one is free to disagree with them, but only after the hard work is done. The burden of proof is on the one disagreeing with the Creeds and Confessions to show how Scripture teaches differently from them. Therefore, when one finds something that one finds strange or that seems wrong in the Creeds and Confessions, one should initially assume that he does so out of ignorance, and not because he is uniquely talented and able to see what the writers of the Creeds and Confessions could not. One does not immediately try to do one's own thinking without consideration of what his theological forebears have thought, "innovating" his own theology different from that of the Creeds and Confessions. Instead, it is only after one has adequately researched the issue and ruminated on Scripture, then if one thinks the Creeds and Confessions are wrong or defective, then one must interact with the literature on the issue and start doctrinal development towards a more biblical position.

In my view therefore, Frame's position falls under the umbrella of historic Bebbingtonian biblicism, in the same way Evangelicals like John Stott hold to the 39 Articles of Religion and yet is a biblicist. In fact, if I may be so bold, historic British Evangelicals are probably more respectful of their creeds and confessions than Frame is towards his. What is the nature of Frame's biblicism? It is in the 3rd point that "creeds, confessions, and systematic thought are less important or unimportant compared to the explicit teachings of Scripture." What this means in Frame's case is that one must "follow Scripture" and not consider systematic theological thought that aims to systematize Scripture, much less care about what other exegetes and theologians of the past have said. As mentioned, Frame sees theology as application, and therefore thinking systematically and deeply in theology is not exactly his focus.

Frame's biblicism is present as he feels free to ignore historic Christian teachings and doctrines taught in the Creeds and Confessions, and comes up with his own spin on the topics (No interaction necessary). His biblicism is present as he refuses to think systematically and will come up with logical contradictory doctrines, the contradiction which only appears when one thinks deeply, and that he refuses to do. Frame may be a deep thinker in apologetics, but he certainly is not one in theology, and he refuses

to let the Creeds and Confessions aid him in his thinking about truth, as we shall now turn to.

Covenant Theology – The Universal Covenant?

The first problem in Frame's main theology comes in his unique way of dealing with God's relation with nature. Innovating his own words and terms, Frame comes up with the idea that there is a "universal covenant." According to Frame, this universal covenant is the first covenant made with the world, a covenant of kingship over everything that extends to all things.³¹ It is this universal covenant that centers God's rule as one over the entire world, as opposed to the Mosaic Covenant which establishes God's rule over Israel.³² In support of his view, Frame cites Psalms 74:12-21, Psalms 95:3-5 and Isaiah 66:1.³³

Covenant and covenant-making is indeed important, even central, in Scripture. Reformed theology has always embraced the explicitly stated covenants (Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, New), as well as the inferred covenants (Adamic),³⁴ but a separate Universal Covenant is unheard of. Why is there a need for a separate "Universal Covenant"? The main reason which can be inferred from what Frame wrote is that there is a need to show kingship over the Gentiles, since the Mosaic Covenant shows kingship over Israel. The passages of Scripture indicate that God is King over the whole earth, so where did his kingship come from except by virtue of a universal covenant?

Here we see the problems that come about with Frame's use of lordship as a central dogma. God is king over the nations, but He is king over the nations not because of any explicit kingship covenant but because He is the Creator. In the Adamic Covenant, Adam failed the covenant and all his progeny sinned in him. The Noahic Covenant preserved humanity against final judgment. The Table of Nations in Genesis 10 established the spreading out of the nations after the Flood. How is God king over the nations? He is King because the nations are from Adam, and from Noah. There is no need for a separate kingship covenant to account for God being king over the nations, because by virtue of Creation, the Adamic and the Noahic Covenants, He already is king. God is king not because of a kingship covenant, but because of creation and of the covenants with the individuals (Adam and Noah) standing at the crossroads of human history!

The proof-texts cited by Frame fare no better, for nowhere in there is it stated the use of "covenant" as being cut or established in a universal fashion, including Psalms

³¹ Frame, *Systematic*, 60-61

³² "Through Isaiah, God mentions two levels of his kingship: his rule from heaven over the whole earth, and his rule over Israel, centered in the temple." (*Ibid.*, 61)

³³ *Ibid.*, 60-61

³⁴ One of the most important historic books on Reformed Covenant Theology is by Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man* (2 volumes; London, 1822; reprint. Grand Rapids, MI; Reformation Heritage Books, 2010)

74:17.³⁵ The mention of the word “covenant” in Psalms 74:20 is clearly in reference to the Mosaic Covenant, and therefore nowhere in any of the texts is a separate universal covenant stated.

We note here that the seeming minor problems of Frame’s methodology are starting to create major problems with his theology. Frame innovates his own spin on covenant theology based on an error that comes because of his use of the central dogma of kingship, ignores how other Reformed theologians in the past and the present have dealt with the topic of covenant (he does not engage historic Reformed Covenant theology), and then tries to pass this off part of just the biblical story. The truth is that there is no separate “universal covenant” because the Adamic and the Noahic Covenants are universal, and all peoples owe God homage because of these.

Covenant Theology – Denial of the Covenant of Works, Monocovenantalism, Justification by Faith Alone

As we move into Frame’s retelling of the “biblical story,” things only get worse. John Frame denies the substance of the Covenant of Works. While claiming he agrees with it,³⁶ Frame states that the Adamic Covenant requires “Adam and Eve to respond in obedient faith.”³⁷ It only gets worse in elaboration:³⁸

But as we have seen, all covenants require obedient faith. This is not a condition of one covenant or another; it is essential to all human deals with God, simply by virtue of who God is. It is a requirement of what I have called the universal covenant. Individual covenants require some specific forms of obedience, but obedience itself, springing from faith, is simply a requirement of all relations between God and human beings. This requirement is implicit in the very distinction between Creator and creature.

Frame credits this understanding of his to the heretic Norman Shepherd, a person he strongly defends.³⁹ In O. Palmer Robertson’s recounting of the Shepherd controversy of 1975-1982 at Westminster Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, Norman Shepherd was tried and removed from his post as the professor there after he was found to have undermined the doctrine of justification by faith alone.⁴⁰ The charge of heresy was as close as possible to being established by the Reformed churches

³⁵ The Hebrew phrase for cutting or establishing a covenant is not found in the texts (קוּם, ברת ברית).

³⁶ “There is, however, nothing wrong with what the Westminster Standards actually say about the covenant of works. ... I do not therefore, object to the phrase *covenant* of works as long as the use of that phrase is kept within the limits of the Westminster definitions, ...” [Frame, *Systematic*, 65-6]

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 65

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 70

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 71; Frame, DKG, 293

⁴⁰ See O Palmer Robertson, *The Current Justification Controversy* (Unicoi, TN: Trinity Foundation, 2003) for an account of the entire affair.

broadly as many of those outside the American Presbyterian circles came to the same conclusion as the seminary and the church. As Robertson said:

... those opposed to Mr. Shepherd's views, ... had no guarantee that the broader community of the church would agree with them in their assessment of Mr. Shepherd's formulations.⁴¹

We can further read for ourselves Shepherd's theological errors in the book referenced by Frame, "The Call of Grace."⁴² In this book written many years after his dismissal from Westminster Theological Seminary, Shepherd expressed his errors on covenant theology and his rejection of justification by faith alone, which had by then metastasized into the Federal Vision heresy. Attacking the very heart of the Reformation doctrine of *Sola Fide*, Shepherd wrote,

Thus, the obligations of the new covenant include not only faith and repentance but also *obedience*.⁴³

Faith alone is not enough to be saved, but obedience or faithfulness is needed in addition for salvation. Defending Shepherd, Frame baselessly assert that Shepherd is just misunderstood because he means something different by the word "necessary" than his critics,⁴⁴ an assertion that is manifestly false after one reads about the controversy, understand the fact that external observers agreed that Shepherd's view was heretical, and after reading Shepherd's book itself. The English language is not infinitely malleable where X can mean non-X; in fact, no language, and no amount of hand-waving at "perspectives," can make heresy become non-heresy.

The biblical and Reformed view is bicovenantal, with the Covenant of Works demanding obedience to be saved, and the Covenant of Grace where salvation is given freely by grace.⁴⁵ Frame and Shepherd materially reject the Covenant of Works, no matter their protestations to the contrary. Giving Frame the benefit of the doubt, we can grant that Frame believes in justification by faith alone, yet all he does in defending Shepherd is to sow confusion among the sheep about the Gospel.

If we charitably grant Frame that he believes what he writes that justification is by faith apart from works,⁴⁶ what might have allowed him to tolerate and even promote heresy?

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 88

⁴² Norman Shepherd, *The Call of Grace: How the Covenant Illuminates Salvation and Evangelism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000)

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 47

⁴⁴ Frame, DKG, 293

⁴⁵ This is the structure of the Westminster Standards: "... the Westminster Standards set forth a bicovenantal structure of covenant, or federal, theology, with a covenant of works and a covenant of grace providing the theological outline of the biblical story of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation (WCF 7.2-3). ... To say this another way, the Westminster Confession's presentation of covenant theology is not monocovenantal." [Ligon Duncan, "Foreword," in Guy Prentiss Waters, J. Nicholas Reid, and John R. Muether, eds., *Covenant Theology: Biblical, Theological, and Historical Perspectives* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 27]

⁴⁶ Frame, Systematics, 954-5; "Even though saving faith is a faith that works, Paul regularly contrasts faith with works in justification. Justification is by faith apart from works, apart from works of the law, without works." (*Ibid.*, 970)

From what has been discussed thus far, it would seem that his view of theology as application and his perspectivalism has rendered him unable to discern error, especially when it comes from someone whom he perceives to be a friend. The same perspectivalism that serves to deflect scrutiny from Frame he uses to cover up heresy by his good friend Norman Shepherd. Frame can therefore claim a belief in justification by faith alone, and at the same time state that obedience is necessary for salvation, since it depends perspectivally on the meaning of the word “necessary.”

Historical election and the road to Federal Vision

Norman Shepherd’s errant covenant theology continues to infect John Frame in his idea of “historical election.” As Frame says,

So although the election of Israel is by grace, there is an important place for continued faithfulness. In his historical form of election, people can lose their elect status by faithlessness and disobedience. Branches can be broken off “because of their unbelief” (Rom. 11:20)

When we consider this divine rejection, we should not argue that the discarded branches were “never really elect.”⁴⁷

This idea of a “historical election” allows one to claim that someone can be truly elect, and yet can be lost. The Reformed doctrine of election however is that it is an act of God in his decree, as stated in the Westminster Confession of Faith

As God has appointed the elect unto glory, so has He, by the eternal and most free purpose of His will, foreordained all the means thereunto. Wherefore, they who are elected, being fallen in Adam, are redeemed by Christ, are effectually called unto faith in Christ by His Spirit working in due season, are justified, adopted, sanctified, and kept by His power, through faith, unto salvation. Neither are any other redeemed by Christ, effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved, but the elect only. (WCF 3.6)⁴⁸

The election of Israel is a corporate election and not a personal election. That should be abundantly clear from the Old Testament Scriptures itself, where being in the commonwealth of Israel was no guarantee of salvation. There is therefore no reason why anyone should read about the election of Israel, which she loses after her final apostasy at the Cross, and thinks it has any bearing whatsoever on eternal individual election, i.e. what the Reformed tradition means when it uses the word “election.” Frame gives no reason why something that is corporate has any bearing on any individual person, and it can be seen here that Frame is mediating Shepherd’s monocovenantal error to others.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 216

⁴⁸ All references to Reformed creeds and confessions are from the Reformed Creeds and Confessions app by Westminster Seminary California, modernized at times.

Part of Frame's biblicism I had mentioned was not thinking through deeply through things and not seeing how what he says he holds to are logically contradictory, precisely because of his flawed view of theology and postmodern idea of perspectivalism. It is clear that saying someone is "historically elect" and yet lose this "historical election," is to say that he is not "elect" in any Reformed sense of the term. Frame wants a person to be both "elect" and "non-elect," "saved by faith alone" and "saved by faithful living" as well. This is where Frame's irrationalism has led to, with an inability to see logical contradictions leading to promotion at best of serious doctrinal errors and heresies, if not outright teaching, endorsement, or even belief in them.

The Ordo Salutis?

It should come as no surprise that Frame is likewise antipathic to the *Ordo Salutis*, since he thinks theology is about application after all. This undermining of and attack on the *Ordo Salutis* is stated as follows:⁴⁹

So in my view, the "order" of the *ordo salutis* does not reflect an objective arrangement in God's redemptive provisions. There are various kinds of order throughout the list, as I indicated above, but no general kind of order that runs through the list as a whole.

Nevertheless, I do think the *ordo* has value as a pedagogical device. It is edifying for a teacher to lead students through the traditional list, explaining the meanings of the terms and the various relationships linking the items in the series. Theologians need to give more, not less, attention to pedagogy, and the *ordo* is a pedagogical device that is effective and that emerges from the theological tradition itself.

Interpreted charitably, Frame has no idea what the *Ordo Salutis* is meant to teach, and therefore uses it as a pedagogical tool, in the same way children memorize their ABCs by singing the alphabet song.

Amyraldian views of the atonement and the free offer

What does God intend to provide for in the atonement? According to the majority Reformed tradition, the atonement provides for the salvation of the elect. As stated in the Canons of Dordt,

The death of the Son of God is the only and most perfect sacrifice and satisfaction for sin, and is of infinite worth and value, abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world. (*Canons of Dordt*, 2. 3)

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 937

For this was the sovereign counsel, and most gracious will and purpose of God the Father, that the quickening and saving efficacy of the most precious death of His Son should extend to all the elect, for bestowing upon them alone the gift of justifying faith, thereby to bring them infallibly to salvation: that is, it was the will of God, that Christ by the blood of the cross, whereby He confirmed the new covenant, should effectually redeem out of every people, tribe, nation, and language, all those, and those only, who were from eternity chosen to salvation and given to Him by the Father; that He should confer upon them faith, which together with all the other saving gifts of the Holy Spirit, He purchased for them by His death; should purge them from all sin, both original and actual, whether committed before or after believing; and having faithfully preserved them even to the end, should at last bring them free from every spot and blemish to the enjoyment of glory in His own presence forever. (CD, 2.8)

The death of Christ was abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world, but its purpose is limited to the elect, and to the elect only. That is what the Reformed teaching of Limited or Definite Atonement teaches.

In the 17th century, the school of Saumur in France through its main proponent Moise Amyraut came up with an alternative manner of understanding the atonement of Christ. According to Amyraut, through a reorganization of the understanding of the order of God's decrees, the atonement of Christ was made for all, but then applied only to the elect.⁵⁰ This idea of an "unlimited atonement" with some variation was also promoted by the hypothetical universalists.⁵¹ Both groups held that the intention of Christ to die on the cross is to in some sense pay for the sins of everyone.

In his *Systematic*, Frame expresses his doctrine in line with Amyraldism, stating that Christ died "to provide the opportunity of salvation for all,"⁵² "God antecedently wants everyone to be saved,"⁵³ and that God has two types of desires: decretive desires "which always come to pass," and preceptive desires which "are not always fulfilled."⁵⁴ Fleshing this out, Frame asserts that "on the basis of John 3:16, ... The full story is this: God sent his Son with both hypothetical and categorical intentions" to save,⁵⁵ and therefore there is "common *chesed*" to all peoples.⁵⁶

The idea that God's precepts are desires is contrary to the meaning of the word "precept," where precepts merely tell us what God has commanded. Whatever God wants He does (c.f. Dan. 4:35), and therefore it is right and proper to see God's desires

⁵⁰ A historical account of the rise of Amyraldism can be read in Brian G. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy: Protestant Scholasticism and Humanism in Seventeenth-Century France* (originally Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969; Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004)

⁵¹ See Jonathan D. Moore, *English Hypothetical Universalism: John Preston and the Softening of Reformed Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007)

⁵² Frame, *Systematic*, 239

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 347

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 349

⁵⁵ Frame, DG, 419

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 441

as pertaining only to His decretive will. The idea that God has an ‘antecedent will’ and a different “consequent will” is at best a version of Amyraldism with its conflicting decrees of God. Frame’s idea of God’s will as it pertains to the atonement of Christ is contradictory and serves only to do one thing: prop up the well meant offer of the Gospel. It is thus the tail wagging the dog, and shows us once again Frame’s view of theology as application where logical thinking is not important.

In Appendix I of the book *The Doctrine of God*, Frame reviewed Brian Armstrong’s book on the Amyraldian controversy.⁵⁷ The main quibble Frame has with Armstrong are his claims that “Amyraut was ‘truer to Calvin’ than his scholastic opponents” and that he is a “good example for contemporary Reformed theologians to follow.”⁵⁸ While these are true critiques, note that Frame nowhere disavow the Amyraldian system itself, because his view on the atonement is similar to theirs, but much less rigorous. Frame’s view of the atonement is thus a form of Amyraldism, though of an even more irrational and illogical form.

Views on subscription and orthodoxy

As previously stated, Frame is antipathic to Creeds and Confessions in general. That translates to how he views confessional subscription: the practice of asking people to subscribe to various Creeds and Confessions as what they themselves believe.

With regards to the practice of confessional subscription, Frame rejects the idea of subscription to any Creed or Confession for Christians in general. According to Frame, even on the issue of saying “Jesus has come in the flesh,” those who deny it are of course not to be “accepted as Christians” but “even here there is no suggestion that church members or officers had to formally confess this statement in the course of an examination in order to be in good standing.”⁵⁹ Presumably, one can be judged a non-Christian yet remain in good standing in a church?! Frame continues with asserting that requiring “the person to study and subscribe to a confession” “requires more than Scripture requires, something beyond faith in Christ,”⁶⁰ and therefore “the use of creeds and confessions to maintain orthodoxy in the church must be regarded as an optional method of protecting true doctrine, not a mandatory means of it.”⁶¹

Frame’s assertions here border on the ridiculous. How can someone be judged a non-Christian and yet remain in good standing in the church? How can someone evaluate whether a person has faith in Christ if assent to true doctrine is not even required? Does a mere “I believe in Christ” suffice to show that someone has faith in Christ? If so, many cults like the Jehovah Witnesses are indeed Christians. John Frame’s attack on confessional subscription is irrational and illogical, and shows the end point of a

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 801-6

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 806

⁵⁹ Frame, *Systematic*, 653

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 654

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

“theology” that is about application and not about truth, that cares not about logical consistency or deep thinking.

In his protestations with regards to confessional subscription, Frame makes the vapid claim that confessional subscription attacks the sufficiency of Scripture,⁶² and that it makes any confession irredeemable and irreformable,⁶³ particularly attacking “strict subscription” in this regard.⁶⁴ These show us that Frame does not understand how confessional subscription works. The Reformed practice of confessional subscription works not because the one confessing it thinks that any Creed or Confession is a higher authority than the Word of God, but because, having read it and examined it, he is convinced that the doctrines taught in that Creed or Confession teaches the true Christian faith. The Confession merely clarifies what the person believes to be true, and so allow the churches to evaluate his faith in order to differentiate a true believer from a heretic. All confession subscription must begin as an examination of the Confession and a subscription to it because (*quia*) it has been examined to be true to the teachings of Scripture. If one does not think any creed or confession is biblical, one is free to not confess it. For example, I as a Presbyterian will never subscribe to the 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith, and there is nothing wrong with that. Confessional subscription merely shows the churches what a person believes to be biblical, and has nothing to do with the sufficiency of Scripture, which as mentioned earlier is not THE systematic theology of the Church, but the foundation or fount of all special revelation accessible to us today.

Likewise, Frame is in error regarding the supposed irreformability of any Creed or Confession. What were the writers of the Westminster Confession of Faith, the 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith, and the Savoy Declaration doing except to reform a previous creed or confession, making a new one that they believe teaches what they hold to be biblical truth. What were the American Presbyterians doing in 1778-1788 when they make a revision of the original 1646 Westminster Confession of Faith to modify what the Confession teaches with regards to the relation between Church and State, if not reforming the Confession according to what they believe to be biblical truths? We see here that subscription to a Creed or Confession does not make it “irreformable.” Frame’s accusations therefore concerning the practice of confessional subscription are false.

Frame does acknowledge some level of confessional subscription as it applies to church officers, but even here he asserts that the biblical view is that one should not hold to confessional subscription but rather that charges against the orthodoxy of church officers are to be “reactive” where they are to be given the “*presumption of*

⁶² *Ibid.*, 656; Frame, DKG, 226

⁶³ Frame, *Systematic*, 656; Frame, DKG, 226

⁶⁴ “In my judgment, strict subscription violates the sufficiency of Scripture. It prevents any teaching in the church that contradicts the confession. Thus, in effect, it recognizes no difference in authority between the confession and the Bible itself” (Frame, *Systematic*, 656). If Frame wants to teach contradictory to any Confession, he is free to NOT subscribe to that Confession.

innocence.”⁶⁵ Thus, insofar as confessional subscription is still present, it should be a “system” subscription so that “the form of subscription should be loose enough to allow the confession to be reformed by the Word of God.”⁶⁶ In response, I restate my point that this misunderstands the very practice of confessional subscription, and that all church officers are already given the presumption of innocence in church trials, as the Shepherd Controversy has already proven. Frame’s “reactive” view makes nonsense of passages like Acts 20:28-31, and betrays his biblicist approach whereby inferences from Scripture are prohibited and something must be explicitly stated in order to be biblically mandated. One wonders why then does Frame protest against open theism, since both open theism and Calvinism are not explicitly stated in the Bible either!

Given Frame’s defense of Norman Shepherd, it is likely that Frame’s attack on confessional subscription has to do with defending his friend, which is why he refuses to engage or discuss in depth any of the topics he has been criticized on. Just like Frame’s perspectivalism, Frame’s idea of “system subscription” serves to obscure error and lets it thrive, while paying lip service to fidelity to the Creeds and Confessions of the Christian faith.

The One Kingdom and misrepresentation

Lastly, we would like to note here that Frame routinely misrepresents his opponents. His book on “the Escondido Theology” misrepresents the teachings of the professors of Westminster Seminary California.⁶⁷ As a former student there, the idea that my professors taught that “kingdom of this present age is limited to the sermons and sacraments of the institutional church”⁶⁸ is laughable. They taught that the *redemptive* kingdom is limited to the sermons and sacraments of the institutional church, and God does not just have one kingdom, the redemptive kingdom, alone.

The Two-Kingdoms theology is controversial in certain Reformed circles, and one can certainly discuss it, yet misrepresenting one’s opponent is a sin. It is clear that Frame believes in only one kingdom of God, and he imputes that “one kingdom” mindset into his opponents, such that when there is talk about the redemptive kingdom being focused on the church, he interprets that as a form of denial that God is king over the world.

The other major problem with Frame’s view of the one kingdom is how he massacres the Great Commission, as he says:

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 655. Emphasis original

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ “Westminster Seminary California Faculty Response to John Frame,” *Westminster Seminary California*. Accessed 2 June 2024 (<https://www.wscal.edu/westminster-seminary-california-faculty-response-to-john-frame/>)

⁶⁸ Frame, *Systematic*, 93

People sometimes argue whether the Great Commission or the cultural mandate is more fundamental. But I believe they are essentially the same. The Great Commission is the application of the cultural mandate to a fallen human race.⁶⁹

The task of the church, then, is to carry out the Great Commission. When it does this, it will also be enabling people to carry out the cultural mandate.⁷⁰

The Great Commission was given to the Church and its focus is on bringing people to salvation in Christ, making disciples among the nations. Yet for Frame this is no different from the Cultural Mandate given to Adam, where Adam was told to be fruitful and multiply and dominate the earth and subdue it. Even if one rejects two kingdoms, it should be clear that one is not the other. It is possible for one to hold to one kingdom of God, and yet to perceive clearly that the Great Commission should come first for the church, and not that they are the “essentially the same.” What is the benefit of the church making great art that glorifies God while people continue in their unbelief and are heading towards eternal damnation?

There is nothing wrong with doing great art or making great music for the glory of God, but such is not part of the Great Commission. Making disciples is the primary goal of the Church, and Frame’s misunderstanding of the topic, and his misrepresentation of his opponents, is regrettable.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we have seen how John Frame’s systematic theology has compounded error after error, where every step of error makes the overall error even worse than it originally is. Frame is a superficial thinker in terms of theology, erroneously making theology to be about application, erroneously making lordship a central dogma of his theology, and erroneously holding on to his perspectivalism and biblicism. That translates to the major error of monocovenantalism in his covenant theology, his uncritical acceptance of everything Norman Shepherd wrote while stating the contradictory position that he also holds to *Sola Fide*, all waived away by an appeal to perspectivalism. He compounds his error with a serious error in the doctrine of election and his embrace of a form of Amyraldism. As if his perspectivalism is not enough, he attempts to open the way for even more heresy by attacking the practice of confessional subscription, showing his ignorance of what it teaches.

Lastly, Frame misrepresents his opponents and show a complete inability to understand what others are saying. I am sure others have attempted to correct him before, so this willful ignorance and misrepresentation he does is particularly egregious for someone who is a minister of the Gospel.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 1035

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 1036

Therefore, after everything has been said, John Frame's *Systematic Theology* is not systematic, and its theology is superficial at best. If one desires to learn systematic theology, even the simple non-Reformed *Systematic Theology* of Wayne Grudem would be much better and helpful here.