

JOHN FRAME: PIONEER OF TRINITARIAN PERSPECTIVALISM

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Abstract: *Trinitarian perspectivalism was pioneered by John Frame. His Trinitarian perspectivalism introduces into the midst of systematic theology the use of triads of perspectives. The two primary triads are the triad for lordship, consisting in authority, control, and presence, and the triad for ethics, consisting in the normative, situational, and existential perspectives. These triads are not merely derived from subjective choice, but are grounded in the Trinity. Frame's perspectivalism has suggestive precedents in Herman Bavinck, Cornelius Van Til, Geerhardus Vos, and Ned B. Stonehouse. Yet Frame takes a step beyond these precedents by pioneering the explicit use of perspectives in systematic theology. There are several benefits: increasing one's insight and penetration into the subject-matter; showing harmony where there is perceived tension; enhancing global relevance in multiple cultures; promoting peace; revealing correspondence to reality; and bearing fruit in knowledge.*

Key words: *John Frame, perspectivalism, multiperspectivalism, Trinitarian perspectivalism method in systematic theology, triads, global Christianity*

John M. Frame is a pioneer in Trinitarian perspectivalism.¹ What is it? And what is its significance? Is it dangerous? How is it useful?

I. PERSPECTIVES

Simply put, a perspective is a view of something by someone from somewhere.² Perspectives can be used in many ways. So, what are the distinctive uses of

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¹ John M. Frame, "A Primer on Perspectivalism (Revised 2008)," <https://frame-poythress.org/a-primer-on-perspectivalism-revised-2008/>; John M. Frame, *Theology in Three Dimensions: A Guide to Triperspectivalism and Its Significance* (P&R, 2017). For briefer and fuller biographies of John Frame, see John M. Frame, "Backgrounds to My Thought," in *Speaking the Truth in Love: The Theology of John M. Frame*, ed. John J. Hughes, 9–30 (P&R, 2009), <https://frame-poythress.org/about/john-frame-full-bio/>; John M. Frame, *Theology of My Life: A Theological and Apologetic Memoir* (Cascade, 2017). See also John M. Frame, "My Books: Their Genesis and Main Ideas," in *Speaking the Truth*, 3–8; John J. Hughes, "The Heart of John Frame's Theology," in *Speaking the Truth*, 31–74. Frame's approach has been called by several names—perspectivalism, multiperspectivalism, triperspectivalism, and symphonic theology, (Vern S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology* [reprint; P&R, 2001]). Frame and Steve Childers have settled on the name "Trinitarian perspectivalism" as the name that best fits the method. <https://www.pathwaylearning.org/pathway-blog/2022-perspectives-intro-by-john-frame>.

perspectives in Frame's work? Does Frame's perspectivalism lead to relativism, as some people fear? Or is it just a useless variation, with little distinctive contribution to the core task of theology? Or is it positively valuable? This article intends to explain the positive value of Frame's perspectivalism.

John Frame incorporates multiple perspectives explicitly into the treatment of virtually every topic in systematic theology.³ This incorporation is a distinctive *method* in theology, which imparts a distinctive organization and texture to his writings.⁴ It contrasts with most earlier writings in systematic theology, which use only one dominant form of explanation for each topic covered ("monoperspectivalism").

II. SUMMARY OF TRINITARIAN PERSPECTIVALISM

First, consider briefly what characterizes Frame's perspectivalism.⁵ In his theological writings Frame repeatedly uses two main triads of perspectives.

1. *Perspectives on lordship*. The first triad, the triad for lordship, consists in three attributes that express God's lordship—the attributes of authority, control, and presence. Authority is God's moral supremacy, his right to express his moral standards and to judge conformity to them. Control is God's supremacy in *power*. God controls what happens in the world. Presence is God's personal intimacy and availability. He is everywhere present in the world (omnipresence).

Frame observes that all God's manifestations of lordship involve not only one of these attributes, but all three together. When God is active, it is the *whole* of God who is active. He is active in authority, in control, and in presence, simultaneously. Thus, any one of the three is a *perspective* on lordship.

As an example, consider God's manifestation of his glory to the Israelites at Mount Sinai (Exod 19–20). God shows his moral authority by speaking the Ten Commandments. He obligates Israel to obey his word, because, as the one true God, he has the proper *authority* to require obedience.

God shows his *control* by the powerful physical manifestations on Mount Sinai—cloud and lightning and thunder. His control is also prominent when Exodus

² Vern S. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity* (P&R, 2018), 11, 15, 262. Frame originated Trinitarian perspectivalism, but Poythress and others have contributed to its development and applications (see Hughes, ed., *Speaking the Truth*).

³ Note especially Frame's "Lordship series": *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987); *The Doctrine of God* (P&R, 2002); *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (P&R, 2008); and *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (P&R, 2010). A condensation is found in *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (P&R, 2013) and more concisely in *Concise Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (P&R, 2023). For a full bibliography, see Hughes, ed., *Speaking the Truth*, 1029–62. More recently, the materials being produced at pathwaylearning.org by John Frame and Steve Childers are organized with attention to the Trinity and reflections of the Trinity in triads of perspectives.

⁴ In particular, Frame's book *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* is largely about method in theology. Its overall organization utilizes perspectives.

⁵ Introductions to his view are available in Frame, "Primer"; Frame, *Theology in Three Dimensions*; Vern S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology*.

20 mentions that he brought Israel out of Egypt (v. 2). He controls the consequences of obedience or disobedience, as mentioned in verses 5–7, 12.

God shows his *presence* at the top of Mount Sinai. His presence is also prominent in the very fact that he makes known his name, which shows his character (v. 2). He makes known his moral will, which also reveals his character.

Though some acts of God display one feature more prominently, authority, control, and presence are always manifested when God is at work. God's control presupposes he has the moral right to exert control. His control reaches out and touches the world, thereby manifesting his presence. His requirements in the law, which show his authority, impinge on people and their behavior. They thereby show his presence with them, in the form of his authority. Each perspective, when used to survey the whole of God's lordship, includes the others. God's authority is universal, and so it applies whenever he exerts control and is present. God's control is universal, and so it includes control over moral standards, and hence authority. It includes control over every place in the world, and so it includes presence. God's presence is universal, and so God is present *in* his authority and *in* his control.

Frame also thinks that the triad of perspectives for lordship reflects the Trinity in a particular way. That is why his approach can be described as *Trinitarian* perspectivalism. In God's relation to the world that he has created, the plan of God shows his authority to bring about what he wants. The plan is preeminently associated with God the Father. The control of God is preeminently associated with the process of accomplishing his plan in history. This accomplishment is preeminently the work of God the Son. Finally, the presence of God is preeminently associated with applying the work of the Son to human recipients, which is the work of the Holy Spirit. Thus, the Father corresponds to authority; the Son corresponds to control; and the Spirit corresponds to presence.⁶

But the correspondence is a matter of preeminence or prominence of one person; it is in harmony with the truth that all three persons of the Trinity are fully involved in planning, in accomplishment, and in application. This full participation is to be expected, because the three persons are one God, and they indwell each other ("coinherence").

The three persons are distinguishable; yet they are all one God. Frame's three perspectives on lordship are distinguishable; yet they are all perspectives on one lordship of the one God. Each of the three persons indwells the other two. They "interpenetrate." Likewise, in a derivative fashion, reflecting the Trinity, the three perspectives on lordship indwell each other and interpenetrate. Each includes the other two, as we have observed.

2. *An answer to relativism.* The fact that the three perspectives reflect the Trinity serves to answer whether the perspectives lead to relativism. They do not. One God, who has full divine authority and divine supremacy, is himself the one absolute. He is also the standard or authority for all human knowledge. All human

⁶ Frame, "Primer"; Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity*, chap. 14.

knowledge that is genuine is anchored in the one comprehensive knowledge of the one true God. The limited knowledge of human beings is, as it were, stabilized by the absolute, comprehensive knowledge of God. Similar observations hold concerning the three perspectives on lordship. The lordship of God is what it is. The truths about God's lordship are absolute. At the same time, it is possible to *view* these truths with any of the three perspectives as a starting point. The three perspectives are complementary, not competitive, not contradictory.

Human beings can, of course, make mistakes. They can believe what is not true. But the remedy is not to despair about finding truth, but to seek truth from God, who reveals it. Preeminently he reveals truth in the Bible, which is his special revelation. But human beings also grow in truth by interacting with God's world, in the presence of God and God's general revelation. God's lordship, in his authority, control, and presence, includes lordship over truth. So, the perspectives on lordship also include an implicit answer to postmodern relativism. The answer does not take the implausible route of denying that human beings use perspectives. Rather, it affirms that, by God's authority, control, and presence, human perspectives actually access truth. Truth, which is first of all God's truth, becomes present to human knowledge.

3. *Perspectives on ethics.* The second triad of perspectives that John Frame uses repeatedly is the triad for ethics. It consists in three perspectives on the field of ethics—the normative perspective, the situational perspective, and the existential perspective.

The normative perspective focuses on norms—moral requirements. The final norm is Scripture itself. But we as human beings have to apply the norms to ourselves and to our situations. Scripture requires this application. So, starting with the norms, we have to look out at all of life, using the norms.

Next, the situational perspective focuses on the situation that a theologian faces. The theologian should ask, "In my situation, what kinds of thinking and action best promote the glory of God?"

Third, the existential perspective focuses on the motives of the persons involved. The core motive should be love—love for God and then also love for neighbor.

Each of these perspectives is a perspective on the *whole* of ethics. As just observed, the norms of the Bible require us to pay attention to the situation. They also require us to pay attention to our motives. Thus, the normative perspective in principle includes the situational perspective and the existential perspective.

Now start with the situational perspective. The most important thing about the situation is God himself. Paying attention to the situation includes paying attention to God. We ask, "What are his desires and his moral standards?" And that leads to the normative perspective. Likewise, we ourselves are, in the end, part of the situation in the broadest sense. Thus, we must pay attention to ourselves and to our motives.

Like the triad for lordship, the triad for ethics is reflective of the Trinity.⁷ The interpenetration of the three perspectives reflects the coinherence of the persons of the Trinity. God the Father, who is preeminently the source for authority, is also the source for *norms*. The Son, by controlling the situation, is associated preeminently with the situational perspective. And the Holy Spirit, by indwelling us, exposes our motives and also changes them. He is therefore preeminently associated with the existential perspective.

III. WHAT DIFFERENCE DO PERSPECTIVES MAKE IN SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY?

By using his triads of perspectives, Frame changed the whole of systematic theology and every topic in it. The change is subtle. It is a change in *method*. It is *not* a dramatic change in the content of doctrine. Frame's systematic theology identifiably belongs in the tradition of Reformed theology.⁸ Frame taught at conservative confessional Reformed seminaries: Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, Westminster Seminary California, and Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida. Moreover, Frame's perspectivalism affirms in principle the positive value and importance of incorporating from past generations all the arguments and conclusions that have a solid foundation in the Bible. From the standpoint of Frame's multiple perspectives, each theologian from the past contributes from his personal perspective.

It is important at this point to distinguish a "personal perspective" from a "thematic perspective."⁹ A personal perspective is simply one person's view of the world. Depending on the person, the view may include both truths and errors. By contrast, a thematic perspective is a view of a large field that starts with a single theme, such as authority, control, or presence. The three perspectives on lordship and the three perspectives on ethics are distinct thematic perspectives.

There is nothing wrong about the fact that each theologian has a personal perspective. Personal perspectives sometimes include distortions (which follows from twin principles: human sinfulness and *sola scriptura*). But perspectives often access truth, truth that is the absolute truth of God. As has always been true, in appreciating the theologians of the past, good and bad have to be sifted with discernment, using the Scripture as the infallible standard.

An element of change due to Frame's method is simply that one becomes *aware* that each theologian operates against the background of a personal perspective. With the passage of centuries, or with movement to another culture, the theo-

⁷ Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity*, chap. 13.

⁸ See, for example, Frame, *Systematic Theology*.

⁹ The terminological distinction follows the lead of Timothy E. Miller, *The Triune God of Unity in Diversity: An Analysis of Perspectivalism, the Trinitarian Theological Method of John Frame and Vern Poythress* (P&R, 2017), 33–36, which distinguishes a "personal perspective" from a "focal perspective." Vern Poythress relabels "focal perspective" as "thematic perspective" (Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity*, chaps. 3–4.)

logical climate and the corresponding personal perspectives of living theologians may change. Luther underwent a dramatic change in personal perspective when he discovered the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Sometimes two different persons have personal perspectives that contradict one another, in which case only one of them can be right. But sometimes apparent contradictions can be resolved. What look on the surface to be contradictions between two theological viewpoints may find a partial explanation in differences of emphasis or differences in starting point, rather than in an actual irresolvable conflict between A and not-A.

IV. VIEWING THE CHANGE USING THREE PERSPECTIVES FOR ETHICS

The change inaugurated with Frame's method is far-reaching in its implications. The nature of the change can be seen by applying to Frame's method itself each of John Frame's three perspectives on ethics—the normative perspective, the situational perspective, and the existential perspective.¹⁰

The normative perspective focuses on norms given by God in Scripture. But Frame has also introduced subordinate norms in the *method* of theology. There are at least four distinctive methodological principles. (1) Theology does well to pay explicit attention to the personal perspectives of the theological writers. (2) Theology does well to use multiple thematic perspectives within a program of theological analysis, in order to make sure that crucial points are not overlooked. (3) Theologians should use distinct thematic perspectives in a complementary way. What is discovered from one perspective should harmonize with what is discovered from another perspective. (4) Any one perspective can potentially be used to examine the *whole* of a subject area, including as well other perspectives on the same area. (This is the principle of interpenetration of perspectives.)

The incorporation of these principles into the texture of theology produces a change in procedure and in atmosphere. At times, the organization of theological discussion takes the form of examining a subject by using one perspective after another, in order to discern whether anything has been left out. In his *Lordship* series in theology,¹¹ Frame himself repeatedly uses the triad for ethics and the related triad for lordship. One or both of these triads are brought to bear on almost every subtopic.

Frame was using these principles from an early point in his classroom lectures. But he was diffident about them. Most of the time he used perspectives as a convenient pedagogical tool to organize the discussion of subtopics. He did not "promote" perspectivalism as a tool for everyone to use—which would have been in tension with the variety of gifts and personal perspectives in the body of Christ.

Next, consider Frame's method from the situational perspective. The situation in theology varies from person to person, from location to location, and from

¹⁰ Frame, "Primer."

¹¹ See footnote 3.

culture to culture. One of the massive influences is culture. Every human being in every culture has the same need for salvation. But the exact, detailed configuration of needs, and the configuration of cultural blind spots and weaknesses, will vary from culture to culture. The theologian aims, not simply to formulate a theological answer that will serve every culture for all time, but to configure the arguments and examples that penetrate effectively the minds and hearts of people belonging to a specific culture. The difference between truth and error still matters. There is no relativism to truth. But there is a sensitivity to how one best sets about to *communicate* the truth, and *which* truths one speaks in initiating an engagement.

The possibility of multiple needs also leads to the possibility of using multiple thematic perspectives *within* the discussion of a single theological topic. Some people may find it easy to absorb a theology that talks about God's covenant with us. Others may hear what we say better if we talk about God's reign over us—the theme of kingship and kingdom. Others may hear better when we talk about being a disciple of Jesus. All three themes are in the Bible.

The third perspective on ethics is the existential perspective. The existential perspective focuses on the motives of the people involved. One aspect to be included is the aspect of the motives of the theologian. Every theologian is finite. Every theologian knows truth from the Bible. But that knowledge is finite. And sinful influences on the mind may have subtle or massive effects. A theologian's approach will inevitably differ in subtle ways from that of other Christians with other background stories and other sinful influences. Awareness of perspectives ought to prompt humility.

V. PAST USE OF PERSPECTIVES

But have not pastors and theologians through the ages of the church always had sensitivity to these issues? Yes, they have—at least, the best of them have. To do well, one does not need to use the word “perspective,” or wave it in the air, or self-consciously think one's way through how to use a theme like “kingdom of God” as a perspective. Without any of these *explicit* actions, one may actually be doing in practice the things that Frame has drawn attention to. But let us ask a complementary question. Could some prospective pastors and theologians, with less than fifty years of wisdom, learn something from an *explicit* discussion of perspectives? The question answers itself.

1. *Why has it taken so long for Frame's method to come to light?* All along, through church history, people have been *tacitly* using some aspects of Frame's method. So why, if the tacit aspect has been around all along, did it take so long for there to be an *explicit* discussion? I do not know. Ultimately, God's timing is inscrutable.

But there is one fairly obvious reason why it might happen. Systematic theology studies truths that are truths from God and that are therefore universal. Some truths, of course, are “tensed”: Jesus was “crucified under Pontius Pilate.” “Crucified” is past tense. Truths like these have to do with specific once-for-all historical events. But the *truth* concerning the event remains true forever into the future. It is forever true that, at a specific moment in the history of the world, Jesus was cruci-

fied. So even this tensed truth has universal relevance and universal scope. The universal relevance of systematic theology can easily lead to the not-so-sound conclusion that the location and personality of the person *studying* systematic theology makes no difference. It can also lead to the not-so-sound conclusion that the location of the application of theology makes no difference.

A second, less obvious reason presents itself as a possibility. Plato and Aristotle prized universal truths over the particular. In their thinking, knowledge worthy of the name must be knowledge of the general, not the particular. For example, by rational analysis, one may learn what the good is, or what man is. It is only incidental to a general truth that one uses a particular instance of goodness or a particular instance of humanity—say Socrates. The habit of prioritizing general truth can easily carry over into a broad atmosphere about knowledge. What is common to all reality, or what is common to all humanity, is what is really important. Therefore, knowing one's wife or one's husband is not important. Or is it? To God, the particular is important. He knows us by name. God accomplishes salvation in particulars of history—with Noah's ark, in the exodus, and climactically in Christ being "crucified under Pontius Pilate."

The principle of prioritizing the universal truth is one form of prioritizing the one over the many. But God made the world as one world with many creatures, one world with many aspects. God himself is one and three.

In terms of perspective, the *neglect* of multiple perspectives can often lead to a kind of prioritizing of the one. We can invent a label for it: *monoperspectivalism*. Allegedly, only one perspective is needed for any one theological topic. And allegedly theology as a whole needs only one final perspective, namely the perspective offered in the one ideal perfect theological handbook. Over the centuries, such an atmosphere may support the assumption that since one perspective can state the truth, any other perspectives are completely superfluous.

2. *John Frame's background.* What was different, then, about John Frame? How did he come to employ perspectives explicitly? Several influences may have contributed.¹² In his brief autobiography Frame mentions, among others, G. Dennis O'Brien, Cornelius Van Til, Geerhardus Vos, Edmund P. Clowney, and Meredith G. Kline.¹³

First, consider O'Brien. As an undergraduate at Princeton, Frame had a metaphysics course from O'Brien. O'Brien did not use the term "perspective," but he prompted Frame to notice differences in the starting point and focus of different philosophers. That planted a seed. The seed sprouted and grew when Frame was a student at Westminster Theological Seminary. The other names above are all asso-

¹² Concerning the perspectives of Dorothy Sayers and Kenneth L. Pike, see Vern S. Poythress, "Multiperspectivalism and the Reformed Faith," in *Speaking the Truth*, 173–200 [185–88], <https://frame-poythress.org/multiperspectivalism-and-the-reformed-faith/>.

¹³ Frame, "Backgrounds." John Murray also has a prominent mention, but it is in connection with his method of deriving theological truth from biblical exegesis.

ciated with Westminster Seminary. In this article we focus on Van Til and Vos.¹⁴ Vos's biblical theology heavily influenced Clowney and Kline.

3. *The influence of Van Til.* Consider then the influence of Cornelius Van Til (1895–1987). In the context of apologetics, Cornelius Van Til emphasized that in God the one and the many are “equally ultimate.”¹⁵ According to Van Til, it is a mistake to try to start only with the one, and to derive the many as an afterthought. Starting with the many in order to derive the one is equally futile. One must start metaphysically with God, who is both one and three, and irreducibly so. John Frame was deeply influenced by Van Til, and this element in Van Til may well be one factor that opened his attention to the unity of truth and the multiplicity of perspectives on the truth—both sides together. In human beings, knowledge of a particular truth is always knowledge of a single, unified truth, and simultaneously knowledge from a particular personal perspective.

Additionally, Van Til's discussion of ethics in his book *Christian-Theistic Ethics* functioned as a specific precedent for Frame.¹⁶ Van Til claims in this book that Christianity has a distinctive approach to ethics, differing from all other ethical systems. It has a distinct *standard*, namely God himself and then also God's word. It has a distinct *goal*, namely serving the glory of God and seeking the manifestation of the glory of God. It has a distinct *motive*, namely love for God from the heart. Van Til saw that these three aspects within the Christian approach interlock with each other. They reinforce each other, and each supports the other two.

As far as I know, Van Til never uses the word *perspective* to describe these three aspects in their relation to each other. But the idea is close at hand. From an early point, Frame made Van Til's ethical thinking his own, and he developed it further by speaking of three *perspectives*. The normative perspective focuses on the standard. The situational perspective focuses on the goal. The existential perspective focuses on the motive.

Frame had Van Til as a predecessor. Van Til himself had predecessors who helped him conceive of Christian ethics in the way that he did. In the Bible he learned about the radical antithesis between Christian discipleship and its alternatives (Luke 14:25–33). But he learned it also with the help of Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck, who emphasized antithesis before he did. The awareness of antithesis kept Van Til from thoughtlessly taking over this or that piece from a non-Christian ethical system. He insisted on the distinctiveness of Christian ethics, which goes together with its cohesiveness. In addition, Herman Bavinck emphasized within his theology the motif of organism. All the parts of an organism work together in the organism as a whole. By analogy, all the aspects of theology belong together, working as a single coherent whole. And all the aspects of Christian ethics

¹⁴ See also Poythress, “Multiperspectivalism.”

¹⁵ Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 4th ed. (P&R Publishing, 2008), 47–51.

¹⁶ Cornelius Van Til, *In Defense of the Faith, Vol. 3: Christian-Theistic Ethics* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980).

work together. In addition, Van Til's emphasis on one and many owes much to Bavinck's emphasis on God as Trinity, who is the ultimate foundation for theology—and indeed for the world itself.

Finally, it may also be that emphasis in Reformed theology on the exalted character of God and the creatureliness of man had an influence. Since human beings are finite, they have limited perspectives. No one has, as it were, the “master” perspective, the direct and complete possession of God's own knowledge.

4. *The influence of Geerhardus Vos's biblical theology.* Geerhardus Vos (1862–1949) also had an influence on John Frame's thinking from an early point. Vos's biblical theology, as embodied especially in his book *Biblical Theology* (originally 1948),¹⁷ had a decided influence on the thinking of many faculty at Westminster Theological Seminary in the days when Frame was a student there, and later a faculty member. Vos's book was an expansion of ideas originally set forth in his inaugural lecture as professor of biblical theology at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1894.¹⁸ Vos conceived of biblical theology as a historical discipline that would study the unfolding of special revelation over time, from creation onward to the New Testament. It was to be complementary to systematic theology, which had the task of assimilating the findings of biblical theology into a complete whole, based on the completed revelation in the canon as a whole.

The point to notice is that Vos's approach was explicitly many-faceted. He desired to respect the distinctive shape of special revelation in each of several epochs, traveling from creation to the New Testament. The emphasis intrinsically included diversity, not just the unity of the complete body of doctrine at the end of the process.

One may also focus on Ned B. Stonehouse (1902–1962), who was professor of New Testament at Westminster Theological Seminary in the first generation of its founding. In accord with the spirit of Vos's emphasis on historical diversity, Stonehouse wrote about the *distinctive* witness found in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.¹⁹ His approach attends to the *diversity* in emphasis in each Gospel, while acknowledging commonalities as well. Without using the word “perspective,” what Stonehouse sets forth is the claim that each Gospel provides a distinctive perspective on Christ and his work. Luke, for example, presents Jesus as the prophet of jubilee release (Luke 4:18). Matthew presents Jesus as the king of the Jews in the line of David (Matt 1:1–17). The three perspectives of the three Synop-

¹⁷ Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Eerdmans, 1948; reprint: Banner of Truth Trust, 1975).

¹⁸ Geerhardus Vos, “The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline, Inaugural Address” (New York: Anson D. F. Randolph & Co., 1894), https://www.onthewing.org/user/Doc_Biblical%20Theology%20-%20Vos.pdf.

¹⁹ Ned B. Stonehouse, *The Witness of Matthew and Mark to Christ* (Presbyterian Guardian, 1944); Ned B. Stonehouse, *The Witness of Luke to Christ* (Eerdmans, 1951); Ned B. Stonehouse, *The Witness of the Synoptic Gospels to Christ* (Baker, 1979).

tic Gospels are the personal perspectives of the human authors. Because God is the divine author, they are also three divine perspectives on the one Christ.²⁰

Like Vos before him, and like Frame after him, Stonehouse sets forth his thesis in the context of his full and robust affirmation of the divine authority and inerrancy of all of Scripture. The distinctness of perspectives involves no error and no actual contradiction. The three perspectives are in harmony in the mind of God. Consequently, it is possible in principle for human beings also to appreciate the harmony. However, because of limitations in human knowledge, we cannot guarantee beforehand that we will have enough information in every case to dissolve all apparent discrepancies.²¹

5. *Frame's development from Vos.* Even early in his career, as a student at Westminster Theological Seminary, Frame had before him these precedents of multiple perspectives in the theological atmosphere.²² He did not invent the *principle* of multiple perspectives. But he self-consciously used the word "perspective." And he carried the attention to perspectives into the practice of systematic theology, a step that Geerhardus Vos did not fully anticipate. Vos *did* anticipate a fruitful, many-sided interaction between biblical theology and systematic theology. But the multiplicity of perspectives was primarily, if not exclusively, on the side of biblical theology. The multiplicity of biblical theology needed to be incorporated into the unity of each topic in systematic theology.

Frame himself, of course, believes in the unity of systematic theology. In principle, there are no contradictions within the realm of true theology. What is different in Frame is that systematic theology now *explicitly* discusses multiple perspectives. And Frame's books of systematic theology conduct this discussion of perspectives not once or twice, not just here or there, but again and again. His first book in the Lordship series, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (1987)²³ has an overall structure largely determined by Frame's triad of three perspectives for ethics and his related triad for lordship.

VI. IS THE USE OF PERSPECTIVES NEEDED?

What are the benefits of using multiple perspectives? Could not the same truths be communicated using only one perspective? Frame's view of perspectives and Stonehouse's study of the Synoptic Gospels show that the answer is complicated. If one perspective were absolutely unable to communicate some essential elements of the truth, there would be a clear need to look for some other way to do it. But part of the innate structure of perspectives is that they are in principle inclu-

²⁰ Vern S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology*, 47–51.

²¹ Vern S. Poythress, *Inerrancy and the Gospels: A God-Centered Approach to the Challenges of Harmonization* (Crossway, 2012).

²² I have not mentioned Edmund P. Clowney, another faculty member, who emphasized that Christ was prophet, king, and priest.

²³ Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*.

sive of other perspectives. For generations systematic theologians can feel no need to multiply perspectives, because, it seems, the truth has already been conveyed adequately by the single perspective that is already in place.

Consider a particular example: in evaluating the moral requirement not to cheat on one's income tax, it might be argued that the situational perspective is unnecessary. The eighth commandment as an explicit norm covers all kinds of theft, and cheating on income tax is a form of theft from the government. This claim is true. But in seeing that it is true, the moral reasoning has already *implicitly* relied on information from the modern situation about the nature of income tax and the particular requirements that modern governments impose on people, obliging them to fill out the forms.²⁴ Putting in false figures on the income tax form is not only stealing but lying. But it is lying because the figures are understood in the culture as corresponding to what kinds of inflow and outflow of money take place in the individual's life at work and commerce. The normative perspective in principle encompasses the situational perspective.

Consider also the Synoptic Gospels. No one of them says everything that *could* be said about the deeds of Jesus and the significance of those deeds. But one can infer from one Gospel emphases and themes that are more prominent in another Gospel.

So, there is a sense in which one perspective is adequate, provided that one expands the perspective sufficiently.

1. *Benefit 1: insights, penetration.* But now the need for expansion displays one of the difficulties. The difficulty is that finite human beings can fail to notice things not "on center stage." In fact, people can fail to notice even the things that *are* on center stage, through sleepiness or deliberate resistance or subconscious distortion. The use of multiple perspectives helps. It helps, not because it is absolutely necessary in the strictest sense in order to have any knowledge at all, but because perspectives in practice enrich each other.

In fact, they encourage *penetration*. A human being with a single perspective, let us say the perspective given in the Gospel of Matthew, can lose energy, stop short, and not take adequate account of what Jesus does to fulfill the year of jubilee and the prophecy in Isaiah 61:1, as given more prominently in the Gospel of Luke (see Luke 4:18–21). Luke helps the student to penetrate more deeply into the total texture of all three Synoptics at once. Likewise, the use of multiple perspectives can help penetration in any topic in theology.

Are there potential liabilities? Of course. One liability is the obvious one—people could mistakenly think the different perspectives are in tension with each other. There is also a possible liability in teaching and communication. Multiple perspectives can be confusing, while a single perspective is easier to absorb. That too may be one reason why systematic theology has chosen over the ages primarily to communicate in a single-perspective mode.

²⁴ This illustration derives from John Frame, oral lectures.

2. *Benefit 2: harmony rather than tension.* The example of the Synoptic Gospels illustrates another benefit of using perspectives: one may answer the claim of tension, or even contradiction, between different teachings in the Bible. The major differences between the Gospels are matters of choice of perspective. Rightly understood, they should not produce tension.

In his book *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (1987), Frame already indicates one reason why he uses the triad for lordship, consisting of authority, control, and presence. He is responding to theologians who find a tension between the transcendence of God and his immanence.²⁵ According to these theologians, if God is too “transcendent,” then he is remote and not immanent. If he is too “immanent,” he is trapped in the world and is not transcendent. So, theologians search for just the right balance between transcendence and immanence.

Frame finds this treatment of the alleged “tension” unsatisfactory and misguided. Scripture shows no tension between transcendence and immanence. It is precisely because God is transcendent Lord of all that he has no difficulty in being present everywhere and exerting his authority and control. The God whom we meet in immanent encounters is the God who in those encounters displays his transcendence.

Mount Sinai is a good illustration. God comes down to Mount Sinai for an intimate encounter with his people. He is immanent on Mount Sinai. Yet, the thunder and lightning in their immanence display the transcendent power of God. No theologian should have to play transcendence off against immanence, seeking “balance.” Rather, one should affirm to the maximum the biblical concept of transcendence, which implies immanence. And one should affirm without hesitation the biblical concept of immanence, which implies transcendence.

Frame in studying the Bible saw God display his authority, his control, and his presence—all at once. So, he provides three categories—authority, control, and presence. Authority and control correspond roughly to what theologians have previously meant by transcendence. Presence corresponds roughly to what is meant by immanence. Frame provides three categories, rather than two, partly because he finds that God displays those three in the Bible. But in addition, if one uses three categories rather than two, there is less temptation to polarize the two into an alleged tension. In a word, transcendence is not the “opposite” of immanence. Authority implies control and presence. Control implies authority and presence. Presence implies authority and control. Any one of the three is a *perspective* on all of God and all of God’s works throughout history. The three perspectives are thoroughly in harmony, and they are in harmony because God is in harmony with himself.

3. *Benefit 3: global relevance and usefulness.* A third benefit lies in global relevance and usefulness. Earlier in this essay, we touched on the fact that people differ from each other. The choice of teaching emphasis that is effective for one person may not be as effective for another. This principle of difference applies both to individ-

²⁵ Frame, *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 13–14.

uals within a single culture, and to the multiple cultures of the world. The teacher who is well equipped will want to have more than one strategy available for communicating effectively.

As an example, consider that traditional Chinese culture has as its highest values wisdom, harmony, and honor. Could a teacher in that culture communicate the gospel without compromise in a way that addresses these values explicitly? Is Christ the wisdom of God that undermines the pretensions of the wisdom of this world by the folly of the gospel (1 Cor 1:18–2:8)? Does Christ restore harmony between God and humanity, and between humans, by the disharmony of the cross (Eph 2:11–22)?

Similarly, counselors trying to help people trapped in sin perceive the value of having multiple perspectives in their toolbox. A direct approach appealing to God's commandment not to sin may help with one person. Another may have to be reminded of the resources of God in Christ that enable a person to forsake sin permanently. Another person still does not see that his conduct or her attitude is sinful, and so the counselor searches for an appropriate verse of Scripture or an appropriate analogy.

4. *Benefit 4: peace.* Another benefit of multiple perspectives is in their potential for peace-making. When two people are at odds, it may be because one is completely in the wrong and the other is completely in the right. But we all know that it does not always work that way. Often one person has a partial perspective on himself or his situation. The other person sees another side of the situation. Dialogue results in heat, because both are unwilling to abandon the genuine insights in their own perspectives. The problem is that both treat their own true insights as if they were the whole truth. Both are unable or unwilling to learn from another perspective something they have left out of reckoning.

Such tensions arise not only in ordinary life but in theology. For example, a theological dispute can take place where one theologian prioritizes transcendence and says little or nothing about immanence. And then an opponent prioritizes immanence and says little or nothing about transcendence. Each theologian becomes more and more frustrated at the obtuseness of the other, who cannot see and affirm clearly what they think “is important.” The two theologians may even dig themselves in, because talking to the other theologian makes them more and more afraid of what will happen if their opponent's selective teaching goes out into the church.²⁶

Acknowledgment of perspectives may make it possible for both theologians finally to realize that, yes, a grain of truth resides in their opponent's position. However, refusal to affirm that grain of truth makes it difficult for their opponent to open up to another, complementary truth.

²⁶ The conflict between John Owen and Richard Baxter has recently been examined at length in Tim Cooper, *When Christians Disagree: Lessons from the Fractured Relationship of John Owen and Richard Baxter* (Crossway, 2024).

One instance of harmonization occurs in Herman Bavinck's treatment of supralapsarianism and infralapsarianism.²⁷ These two views differ in their account of the logical order of the decrees of God. The infralapsarian position says that the logical order is similar to the chronological order of the events that are decreed. The supralapsarian position, by contrast, starts with the divine goal, and reasons backward to the means for achieving that goal. Bavinck perceives that each view has a valid concern. Infralapsarianism focuses on the causal order. Supralapsarianism focuses on the teleological order, the order of purposes. It moves from the goal backwards.

In Bavinck's estimation, each position is one-sided:

The simple fact that each of these views rests on a specific group of texts and fails to do full justice to the other group already suggests the one-sidedness of both groups.²⁸

But Bavinck understands that human finiteness makes it useful to adopt temporarily one or the other viewpoint:

Given our limitations, we can only put ourselves in one or the other position, so that the proponents of a causal and the proponents of a teleological world-and-life view may at any time clash with each other. But for God the situation is very different. He surveys the whole world-historical scene. All things are eternally present to his consciousness.²⁹

In the end, Bavinck treats the two positions as complementary perspectives on the same reality, namely the richness of God's eternal counsel, his comprehensive plan. Bavinck does not use the word "perspective," but the expression "put ourselves in one or the other position" is suggestive of perspectival thinking. Human beings take this or that "position" as a viewpoint, a perspective, from which they notice some of the truth about God's counsel. By contrast to limited human knowledge, God "surveys" everything comprehensively, in eternal presence.

Bavinck proposes a harmonization:

Accordingly, inherent in the decrees reciprocally, as in the facts of world history, there is not only a causal [as in infralapsarian thinking] and teleological [as in supralapsarian thinking] but also an organic order.³⁰

In "an organic order," there are many-sided relations and connections:

Just as in any organism all the parts are interconnected and reciprocally determine each other, so the world as a whole is a masterpiece of divine art, in which

²⁷ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Volume 2: God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Baker, 2004), 361–66, 382–92.

²⁸ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:385.

²⁹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:392.

³⁰ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:392.

all the parts are organically interconnected. And of that world, in all its dimensions, the counsel of God is the eternal design.³¹

Bavinck has in fact introduced a perspective of his own, the perspective arising from the theme of organism. This perspective encourages us to look at many-sided connections within the unified plan of God. Bavinck thereby illustrates the usefulness of adopting a fresh perspective when one considers a theological controversy that appears to be locked between two poles.

5. *Benefit 5: correspondence to reality.* Another significant benefit is correspondence to reality. Human beings have their perspectives. But the world itself also has multiple structures. The most fundamental reality is God, who is Trinity. God is one God who is three persons. Each person of the Trinity has the whole knowledge of God. Each person also has his own distinctive personal perspective:³²

All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. (Matt 11:27 ESV)

For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. (1 Cor 2:10–11 ESV)

Consequently, the world that God produces through his Trinitarian speech displays reflections of the Trinity in its structure.³³ Frame's triad for lordship and his triad for ethics display both the distinctiveness of each perspective, the unity of all three perspectives, and the interpenetration of each perspective in encompassing the whole.³⁴ This kind of structure is a kind of ectype; it reflects the Trinity, which is the original pattern, the archetype. God is one God in three persons who coherently indwell one another.

In this connection, the word "perspective" has a potential liability. It can sound to some ears like a *merely* subjective choice—in the end, an arbitrary choice. Postmodernist relativists use perspectives to promote relativism. They may say, "Each person has his own perspective. You have your truth, and I have mine. All that we have are 'truths' relative to our subjective personal location." But John Frame, as a person who affirms and accepts the divine authority of the Bible as the word of God, believes in absolute truth. God's own personal knowledge is absolute truth. And whatever God affirms in the Bible is absolute truth. Our human reception is always finite. But the receiver still receives truth, when it is a reception in faith, in accord with the word of God. The core conviction in Frame's use of per-

³¹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:392; Herman Bavinck, "Supralapsarianism and Infralapsarianism," http://www.the-highway.com/Bavinck_predestination2.html.

³² Vern S. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity*, chap. 30.

³³ Vern S. Poythress, *Making Sense of the World: How the Trinity Helps to Explain Reality* (P&R, 2024).

³⁴ Vern S. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity*, chaps. 5, 6, 7, 13, 14.

spectives is the harmony of the one and the many. The archetypal harmony is in the Trinity, and ectypal harmonies therefore exist in humanity. Frame's triads in their unity and diversity reflect the archetypal unity and diversity in the Trinity.³⁵

In a different context, Kenneth L. Pike also uses a triad of perspectives in the analysis of language.³⁶ As early as 1958, Pike observed that all the languages of the world exhibited a triad of interlocking structures, which he saw as reflective of the Trinity.³⁷ He adopted the term "tristructural." Each structure in language was discerned by a human analyst using a selective focus or perspective (a thematic perspective). But the three structures, present through all of language, exist out in the world *prior* to the analyst's attempts to engage them. The structures are, as it were, *metaphysical*. They are out there in reality, rather than being merely generated by subjective human choice on the part of the analyst. They are objective rather than merely subjective—though of course they become subjective aspects in the mind of the analyst as he becomes conscious of what is there in the world.

To describe Frame's approach, John Frame and Steve Childers have accordingly adopted the label "Trinitarian perspectivalism."³⁸ The Trinity is the objective anchor for the perspectives. God is objectively *there*, as Francis Schaeffer found himself insisting, in trying to explain the Christian faith to skeptics.³⁹ The word *perspectivalism* suggests that this objective Trinitarian reality gets reflected through man as the image of God, in the subjectivity of human knowing. Frame himself worked out the contours of Trinitarian epistemology extensively in his 1987 book, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*. It should not be surprising that the triads for lordship and for ethics, in reflecting the Trinity, are put to extensive use in the other volumes in Frame's Lordship series.

6. *Benefit 6: fruitfulness.* A method with the benefits already mentioned can bear fruit in insights and in application in multiple cultures. I have found it fruitful myself in my own theological journey. Within the context of the harmony of the Trinity, a student of the Bible may use perspectives to build bridges between the multiple themes of biblical theology and multiple complementary approaches to topics in systematic theology.

John Frame has illustrated this bridge-building with his use of the triad for lordship. One of the fruits, already mentioned, is dissolving the perception that transcendence and immanence are in tension with each other. As another example, Frame uses multiple perspectives to illumine the vexed issue of whether miracles continue after the time of the apostles.⁴⁰

³⁵ For triads reflecting the Trinity, see Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity*.

³⁶ Kenneth L. Pike, *Linguistic Concepts: An Introduction to Tagmemics* (University of Nebraska Press, 1982); earlier, Kenneth L. Pike, "Language and Life [4] Tristructural Units of Human Behavior," *BSac* 115.457 (1958): 36–43.

³⁷ Pike, "Language and Life."

³⁸ pathwaylearning.org.

³⁹ Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There: Speaking Historic Christianity into the Twentieth Century* (InterVarsity, 1968).

⁴⁰ Frame, *Doctrine of God*, chap. 13; Poythress, *Symphonic Theology*, chaps. 9–10.

Timothy P. Yates has used themes from biblical theology to link the distinct foci of each of the Ten Commandments to attributes of God and also ways in which human beings imitate God in obedience.⁴¹ One of the fruits is a further display of the organic unity of theology across topics: the doctrine of God, the doctrine of man, the doctrine of Christ, and the doctrine of salvation are all studied from the ten perspectives that start with the Ten Commandments.

Using multiple perspectives within the doctrine of man illumines the original creational relation of God to man as not only covenantal, but as a father-son relation and a king-vassal relation. Sin and Adamic representation and free agency are illumined from multiple perspectives.⁴²

One may also use perspectives as a way to discover insights in each individual text of the Bible. Each text can be considered from multiple perspectives, all in harmony with the message of the canon as a whole.⁴³ Fruit can come in the form of insights into every sphere of academic study, because God is there in every sphere. Fruit is an organic product. It takes time. But in the long run, the benefits multiply.

⁴¹ Vern S. Poythress, “Introducing the Law of Christ (*Lex Christi*): A Fruitful Framework for Theology and Life,” 2024, <https://frame-poythress.org/introducing-the-law-of-christ-lex-christi-a-fruitful-framework-for-theology-and-life/>, introduces Timothy Paul Yates, *Westminster’s Foundations: God’s Glory as an Integrating Perspective on Reformed Theology*, rev. ed. (Unveiled Faces Reformed Press, 2024). <http://bethoumyvision.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/J2W-Series.-Westminster-Foundations.pdf>.

⁴² Vern S. Poythress, *Making Sense of Man: Using Biblical Perspectives to Develop a Theology of Humanity* (P&R, 2024).

⁴³ Poythress, *Symphonic Theology*; Vern S. Poythress, *Reading the Word of God in the Presence of God: A Handbook for Biblical Interpretation* (Crossway, 2016), chap. 18.