JETS 32/1 (March 1989) 99-105

ON THE THEOLOGICAL CORRELATION OF DIVINE AND HUMAN LANGUAGE: A REVIEW ARTICLE

MARK W. KARLBERG*

Over a decade ago John Frame wrote a small booklet entitled *Van Til: The Theologian* in which the program for the work under review[1] was laid. As a successor to Cornelius Van Til in the department of systematic theology and apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary, Frame sees himself as a true exponent of Van Tilian presuppositionalism, defending and building upon (even correcting) the insights of his predecessor. Frame's theological approach is thought to be the result of Van Til's own teaching in dogmatics. "Though Van Til himself does not say this, his thought suggests the desirability of an orthodox Christian 'perspectival' approach to theology."[2] More importantly, Frame defines theology here as "*the application of Scripture to all areas of human life.*"[3] This viewpoint is foundational to the author's theological method, which he calls (multi)perspectivalism.

In *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* the author propounds a full-scale exposition of his thinking, in which he offers something new in Reformed dogmatics as well as providing a corrective to the Reformed theological tradition. Vern Poythress, a colleague and former student of Frame, hails this study as "the most important single book in theology to appear in the 20th century."[4] Many of the comments and criticisms made here in regard to Frame's teaching apply equally to the work of Poythress, who must also be seen as an architect of this new theological methodology.[5] Frame identifies three areas specifically in which his presentation challenges traditional views: (1) the definition of theology as application of Scripture, (2) the role of multiple perspectives in theological exposition, and (3) his critique of Biblical and systematic theology.[6] This third area

* Mark Karlberg is a teacher and writer in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

[1] J. M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God. A Theology of Lordship: A Series* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987).

[2] J. M. Frame, *Van Til: The Theologian* (Phillipsburg: Pilgrim, 1976) 13.

[3] Ibid. 25 (italics his).

[4] This statement appears in the publisher's advertisement for the book.

[5] V. S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987). In the course of our evaluation comparisons will be drawn between the views of Frame and Poythress.

[6] Frame, *Knowledge* xvi. Later in his discussion Frame inconsistently and mistakenly identifies his method with traditional Reformed theology. He describes the perspectival relationship between knowledge of Scripture, the world, and the self as being "interdependent and ultimately identical" (p. 89). He then concludes: "Strange as all that may sound to Reformed people, I insist that this approach is nothing less than generic Calvinism" (p. 90).

deals with a subject that has occupied a prominent place in the history of Reformed covenantal theology. Frame's criticisms here, therefore, strike at the very heart of the Reformed tradition.

Pilate once asked, "What is truth?" No more basic question can be raised than this. Frame similarly asks, "What is 'meaning'?" Strongly influenced by Ludwig Wittgenstein's linguistic analysis, Frame believes "that *meaning* is best employed to designate that *use* of language that is authorized by God."[7] He insists that meaning is application.[8] This viewpoint has disastrous implications for the interpretation of Scripture. Rather than locating the truth in God himself, as Reformed dogmaticians have uniformly done, Frame rests meaning in human language—language that is itself informed by the language of God in Scripture. The difficulties with this view will be noted below.

One of the errors of perspectivalism is the cleavage made between Scripture and theology as an exclusively post-canonical activity. Frame argues that Scripture as the once-for-all deposit of truth merely requires application, and this making of Scriptural application he calls theology. The question arises: Is it legitimate to speak of Pauline or Johannine theology (to name only two in the Bible)? If so, what is the methodological difference between canonical and post-canonical exposition? Are not both concerned to "meet human needs"?[9] Frame insists that theology's task is only to help us to use the truth—that is, Scripture.

The problem with Frame's conception of Scripture and theology centers upon his three methods of knowledge (also called perspectives or forms of knowledge). This threefold classification of knowing is what gives shape and content to the teachings of multiperspectivalism. According to Frame, the three methods or forms of acquiring knowledge are the normative, the situational, and the existential. After describing each of these, he concludes: "We have seen that knowledge of God involves (and is involved in) knowledge of His law, the world, and ourselves. It is also important to see that the latter three forms of knowledge are involved in one another because of their mutual coordination in God's plan."[10] The author also speaks of these three perspectives as correlative and coextensive. What this does is to place Scripture on a par with the human situation (including both the situational and existential factors). For Frame there are merely differences of emphasis among these three.[11] Poythress, following Frame's line of reasoning, argues that what we learn from one perspective in Scripture is corrected or improved by other perspectives. Not all perspectives in the Bible are equally prominent or useful. Furthermore, "it

[7] Ibid. 33.

[8] Ibid. 82, 97. "The meaning of any text [of Scripture], then, is the *set* of uses to which it is suited" (p. 199). Poythress likewise argues against a clear distinction between meaning and application, saying that the distinction is merely a relative one ("Divine Meaning of Scripture," *WTJ* 48 [1986] 251).

[9] Frame, *Knowledge* 79.

[10] Ibid. 65.

[11] Ibid. 141.

is misleading to say that all perspectives are valid."[12] The underlying problem is that neither Poythress nor Frame distinguishes sufficiently between Scripture and interpretation, simply because their perspectival methodology employs a faulty conception of meaning. Poythress' symphonic theology, like Frame's theologizing, is nothing other than a variation on a theme—composed and orchestrated for the new school of language philosophy.

In a closing appendix[13] Frame addresses this problem further:

> It occurs to me, as I reread what I have written, that my epistemological formulations may pose an ontological problem for some readers. I have written that norm, situation, and self are "perspectivally" related, which suggests that the three are really identical. . . . This problem, I think, can be overcome once we recognize that there are different *levels* of normativity. "Everything is normative," but everything is not *equally* normative. There is a "hierarchy" of norms.[14]

Frame does more than suggest identity between the three perspectives. He has explicitly told us that they are ultimately identical. His remarks in this appendix do not resolve the deeply inherent problematics in his methodology. The distinct boundaries he attempts to establish between the three perspectives become fuzzy in the process of theological interpretation. Doubtless Frame desires to maintain the distinction between Scriptural and extra-Scriptural factors. But contrary to his best intentions, his methodology betrays this concern:

> There is, in other words, an important difference between the Scriptures on the one hand and the reasoning by which we determine applications of Scripture on the other. We discover the applications through fallible means, but of course that is true with respect to all exegesis, all understanding of Scripture. But once we discover a true application of Scripture, that application is unconditionally binding.[15]

The author misconstrues the element of human subjectivity in theological discourse, jeopardizing the authority and self-sufficiency of Scripture. In Frame's theological method, how can the fallible process of Scriptural application result in "unconditionally binding" obligation to law—that is, Scripture? Has not Frame blurred the distinction he claims to make between the infallible Scriptures and fallible Christian theology?

Frame concedes: "This sort of talk sometimes sounds like relativism. Actually, though, it is far from that, and the motive behind it is quite the opposite. The main point of my arguments for perspectivalism is to defend the absolute authority of Scripture as a whole over against all the

[12] Poythress, *Symphonic* 44.

[13] Frame, *Knowledge*, "Appendix J: An Ontological Clarification," pp. 401-402.

[14] Ibid. See n. 6 above.

[15] Frame, *Knowledge* 68. How does Frame enunciate what Scripture says before he engages in the theological application (i.e. interpretation) of Scripture? Is this done by merely reciting Scripture?

pretensions of theologians."[16] Just how Frame presumes to accomplish this is unclear. Not only does Frame's method tend to undermine the authority of Scripture, but it challenges Scripture's attribute of perspicuity. Frame castigates traditional dogmatics for expounding what he calls "precise statements of doctrine" free from all subjective influences—that is, statements of truth that are objectively and eternally valid.[17] Even Scripture, the author contends, is not objectively valid in this sense. Frame prefers instead to speak in broad and unqualified terms of the vagueness of Biblical revelation. With respect to the creeds of the Church, "as elsewhere in theology, we must be satisfied with vagueness."[18] Earlier he states: "Scripture, for God's good reasons, is often vague. Therefore there is no way of escaping vagueness in theology, creed, or subscription without setting Scripture aside as our ultimate criterion."[19] In comparing the nontechnical use of words and phrases of ordinary language in the Bible with the technical vocabulary of systematic theology, Poythress asserts:

> God fully knows variations in possible use of each vocabulary item of Hebrew and Greek. He does not invent an artificial jargon of technical terms but uses the resources that he himself has designed, the resources of vagueness. We are less careful than he is when we import mistaken views of human language and expect God to conform to them.[20]

To be sure, there are times when theologians affirm more than is warranted from the text of Scripture. But this says nothing about the legitimacy of the theologian's use of technical language *per se* in the systematizing of the teachings of Scripture. Nor do we deny that there are difficulties and complexities in the Biblical text. But these matters are altogether different from what Frame and Poythress have in view. It is precisely their concept of vagueness in Scripture that prompts the use of multiple perspectives in the application-interpretation of Scripture.[21]

[16] Ibid. 194. Compare Poythress: "We know that truth is absolute—in particular, the truths of the Bible. We allow ourselves, however, to slip over into excessive presumption with regard to our human knowledge. We do not reckon with the fact that our interpretation of the Bible is always fallible. Or if we know a piece of truth, we may erroneously suppose that we know it precisely and exhaustively" (*Symphonic* 46). Poythress states in absolute terms: "No category gives us a kind of metaphysically ultimate analysis of the world. Nothing will change the fact that we are creatures with limited knowledge and with a variety of possible perspectives" (p. 82). What does this says, for example, about the apostle Paul's systematizing of redemptive revelation in such letters as Romans and Galatians? Are the Biblical authors in a unique category? See the helpful essay by D. A. Carson, "Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: The Possibility of Systematic Theology," in *Scripture and Truth* (ed. D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983) 65-95.

[17] Frame, *Knowledge* 307.

[18] Ibid. 309.

[19] Ibid. 226.

[20] Poythress, *Symphonic* 79.

[21] Poythress claims: "The use of a multiplicity of perspectives does not constitute a denial of the absoluteness of truth. Rather, it constitutes a recognition of the richness of truth, and it builds on the fact that human beings are limited" (ibid. 45). A few pages later he informs us that "there is a single perspective on truth, God's perspective, because there is only one God" (p. 51). This idea that Scripture presents one unified, divine perspective (coincidentally, the

Regarding the creature's knowledge of the Creator, Frame sees "no reason why even an unfallen race may not have proceeded by the method of trial and error in the continuing quest for knowledge. Error as such need not cause pain or wrongdoing; to make an honest mistake is not in itself sinful."[22] What is in view here is the matter of theological understanding (in the proper sense of the knowledge of God).[23] Just as it is not sinful, in Frame's opinion, that one now under certain circumstances happens not to believe in the limited atonement of Christ, so it is conceivable that one could hold erroneous conceptions about God in the prelapsarian world and not be guilty of sin. But contrary to Frame's speculative thinking, theological apprehension, though incomplete and finite, must necessarily be true and perfect. Was not Adam created in true knowledge, righteousness and holiness? Misinterpretations of God as well as the creature's duty to God are the consequences of sin. Human acquisition of knowledge, though a gradual process, would have been free from all theological error had Adam successfully completed the probationary test. (In other areas of knowledge and pursuit humankind would no doubt have progressed through the method of trial and error—for example, in scientific and technological study.)

Since Scripture is the unique and infallible deposit of truth, Frame reasons that theological interpretation through these many centuries after the time of the apostles cannot be viewed as the Church's progressively deepening understanding of the teachings of Scripture. Theology's task is not to explain or interpret the Scriptures in the sense of reorganizing and developing the system of doctrine contained in the Scriptures. Rather, its task, as we have observed, is merely to apply Scripture. Frame contends that it is misleading to speak, as many do, of the historical development of doctrine. There are only new applications of Scripture arising out of the changing needs of the Church through the course of history.

Perspectivalism marks the beginning of a sad chapter in the history of Reformed systematics.[24] It amounts to theological confusion at a fundamental level. In the first place, the method of perspectivalism is inherently anti-systematic. Poythress asserts: "I claim that no single category, theme,

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view of the older Reformed dogmaticians) conflicts with Poythress' previous assertion that the many and varied perspectives in the Bible correct, improve and enrich one another. If Poythress means to say that the various teachings ("perspectives") in the Bible are part of a consistent, unified whole, whereas prior to glorification our comprehension is incomplete and our interpretations of Scripture lack full and perfect consistency, then his description of theological method will have to be reformulated. He will need to reconsider, accordingly, the nature and importance of the system of doctrine contained in the Bible.

[22] Frame, *Knowledge* 20-21.

[23] Frame unjustifiably broadens the definition of theology by saying "all knowing is theologizing" and "all theology (because all theology ascertains the meaning of Scripture texts) is exegesis" (ibid. 128, 167, 206-207).

[24] Compare my forthcoming review of R. A. Muller's important and valuable study, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* (Vol. 1, Prolegomena to Theology), in *WTJ*. Multiperspectivalism is an example of what D. Jacobsen has described as the new "evangelical hermeneutical pluralism"; "The Rise of Evangelical Hermeneutical Pluralism," *Christian Scholar's Review* 16 (1987) 325-335.

or concept and no system of categories can furnish us with an infinitely deep analysis of the world."[25] Frame maintains that theology is "in many ways more like an art than a science."[26] Contrary to the teachings of perspectivalism, to the extent that our interpretation of Scripture (i.e. the system of doctrine) corresponds to God's revelation in nature and Scripture it provides a metaphysically ultimate and true analysis of the world. Secondly, this new approach to Reformed theology leads to a thoroughgoing reevaluation of theological controversies, past and present. Frame's analysis of the Van Til/Clark debate concerning the doctrine of the incomprehensibility of God, theonomy versus covenant theology, and such Reformed subjects as the doctrine of the decrees, the *ordo salutis*, and faith as sole instrument of justification, all reflect deep-seated differences between his methodological correlation of divine and human thought and the teachings of historic Reformed theology.

Though Frame's writings display a marked degree of self-confidence, one might have expected from him a more controlled, less emotional response to the criticisms of his work made by Jim Halsey, especially since he is so ready to criticize the views of others (even while pleading earnestly for open dialogue). Frame shows little willingness to listen sympathetically to his critics and instead is too ready to misinterpret his opponents. Over and again Frame prefers to reduce theological debate to mere differences in emphasis (i.e. perspectival differences), as in the Van Til/Clark controversy. Thus he proposes: "Multiperspectivalism in theology often helps restore the proper balance, because it helps us to see that some doctrines that are apparently opposed are actually equivalent, presenting the same truth from various vantage points."[27]

In summary, Frame's failure to treat more responsibly the history and integrity of Reformed dogmatics contributes to his hasty dismissal of Biblical theology (the redemptive-historical method as exemplified, for example, in the writings of Geerhardus Vos) as an important controlling factor in textual exegesis—a factor, we might add, distinctive of covenant theology. Frame appears more interested in establishing the legitimacy of his own methodology (with which we take vigorous exception) than he is in doing justice to traditional Reformed dogmatics. His understanding of the acquisition of human knowledge described in the above reflects the author's free thinking. We can be grateful that Frame has been neither vague nor ambiguous in setting forth his method of theological interpretation. We deeply regret, however, this his teaching has taken the direction it has. As a student of Reformed systematics I would be remiss to ignore or tone down the serious errors and deficiencies in this methodology

[25] Poythress, *Symphonic* 82.

[26] Frame, *Knowledge* 168. In Frame's thinking, the traditional forms of theological study (exegetical, Biblical, systematic and practical) are different "programs," "methods," "strategies," or "agendas," all perspectivally related to one another. They are merely different ways of doing the same thing (p. 206).

[27] Ibid. 235.

and not sound a note of grave concern amidst the cacophony of perspectives. Hopefully, this critique of multiperspectivalism will stimulate constructive discussion among evangelical theologians who cherish the system of truth they find in Scripture in the face of modern-day theological eclecticism.