

*"A must-read for those who seek to be challenged in their understanding of biblical and theological issues that face the church of Jesus Christ today."*

—Kenneth Gary Talbot

JOHN FRAME'S  
SELECTED  
SHORTER WRITINGS

VOLUME TWO

JOHN M. FRAME



“*John Frame’s Selected Shorter Writings, Volume 2* is unique in several ways. For one, much of it reads more like a set of sermonic reflections than a compilation of theological essays. The highly practical nature of the work is likely due to the fact that now, reaching the end of his teaching career, Frame wants to impart in his *Selected Shorter Writings* volumes ‘the most important thoughts I would like to leave to the next generation.’ Since these are Frame’s ‘most important thoughts,’ I find myself savoring each word, even more so than when reading his other works. Everything the apostle Paul wrote is vitally important. But when I read Paul’s parting words to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20), I want to pay special attention, because here I’m exposed to some of his chief concerns. Finally, anyone who has read Frame’s *Theology of Lordship* series may have picked up on the way in which the theologian can crystallize and clarify a vital thought in a digression that can occur much later and under different subject headings. *Selected Shorter Writings, Volume 2* serves to elucidate a considerable number of subjects in Frame’s previously written works.”

—**John Barber**, Pastor, Cornerstone Presbyterian Church, Palm Beach Gardens, Florida; Adjunct Professor, Fine Arts, Saints Bible Institute, San Lorenzo, Italy

“In the tradition of John Calvin (*Tracts and Treatises*), Jonathan Edwards (*Miscellanies*), and B. B. Warfield (*Selected Shorter Writings*), Frame has now published his own *Selected Shorter Writings, Volume 2*. As a seminary professor for more than four decades, he has distinguished himself as a prolific author and one of America’s foremost theologians and philosophers. Before this book was published, most of these rare theological, philosophical, and practical gems had been hidden away in his electronic files or posted on websites and blogs not widely known to the public. Do yourself a favor and mine the rich truths in these winsome and provocative essays (written in Frame’s inimitable style of robust charity) on a wide array of important topics. I highly recommend it!”

—**Steven L. Childers**, Associate Professor of Practical Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando; Founder and President, Pathway Learning

“In comparison with the ‘feast’ of John Frame’s major works, these are the ‘nuggets.’ They still offer vintage Frame, and I heartily recommend them for their wisdom, balance, and incisiveness. Some have a more personal, informal tone, and will usefully complement Frame’s major writings, especially for those who want to understand the connection of his writings to the person behind them.”

—**Vern S. Poythress**, Professor of New Testament Interpretation, Westminster Theological Seminary; Editor, *Westminster Theological Journal*

“This book is a veritable cornucopia of Frame’s theology, and one will find here appetizing personal information no less than rigorously biblical analysis. Frame is not afraid to slay sacred cows (‘narrative theology,’ the centrality of justification by faith alone, politically liberal evangelicalism, N. T. Wright’s bibliology) if he believes they don’t pass biblical muster. Whether you have never read Frame before or have read all that he’s written to date, this book will inform, intrigue, encourage, edify, rouse, and convict you.”

—**P. Andrew Sandlin**, President, Center for Cultural Leadership, Coulterville, California

“Dr. Frame has produced a series of theological articles that will encourage the reader to consider more carefully the correct understanding of various Christian ideas encountered in the progress of dogmatic thought. Dr. Frame is committed to being biblical, with a focus on being balanced in one’s theological perspective. For Professor Frame, being biblically balanced expresses his goal of a lifetime of teaching theology. He has sought not only to express orthodox doctrine from a biblical perspective, but also to convey a theology that is capable of affecting a Christian’s total world- and life view. Theology is not an abstract study. Understanding theology not only requires us to correctly understand the propositional truth of Scripture, but also engages believers in their daily walk with Christ. This excellent book is a must-read for anyone who seeks to be challenged in understanding the biblical and theological issues that face the church of Jesus Christ today.”

—**Kenneth Gary Talbot**, President, Whitefield Theological Seminary

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SHORTER WRITINGS

VOLUME 2



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SHORTER WRITINGS

VOLUME 2

JOHN M. FRAME



P U B L I S H I N G

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To Dr. James I. Packer

Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always  
abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your  
labor is not in vain. (1 Cor. 15:58)



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# Foreword

IT SEEMS THAT divine providence blesses every generation of Christ's followers with a few teachers whose influence is enormous. This is certainly true of John Frame. Since he began teaching at Westminster Theological Seminary, his lectures, sermons, and publications have deeply shaped how countless students, pastors, and scholars think about a wide range of subjects. Whether you are a devoted disciple or a staunch opponent, it is impossible to deny the impact that John has had and that he will continue to have in the future. This influence is the result of John's strong commitment to Scripture over church tradition, his creativity, and his clarity.

The present volume is not intended to be a systematic presentation of John Frame's theology. Rather, it is a collection of brief essays spanning theological topics, education, theological method, apologetics, ethics, the church, and a couple of personal reflections. Despite its variety, this collection represents John's well-known belief that theology is the application of Scripture by persons to life. His definition of theology reflects not only the reality that no theological outlook can be entirely divorced from the life of the theologian, but also the obligation that theologians have to make their outlooks relevant to the lives of Christ's followers. These essays focus especially on the latter by pointing out concrete ways in which the Scriptures are the only unquestionable rule of faith and life for Christians, no matter what facet of faith and life is in view.

I still recall when I first met John Frame several decades ago. Despite his accomplishments, he was unassuming and kind then, just as he is today. I recall even more vividly how John personally reached out and encouraged me at a very difficult time in my life. He has been a dear teacher, mentor, and colleague. So I can assure you that the viewpoints

you will find in this volume come from a man who is brilliant by any standard. More importantly, they come from a man who has devoted himself to applying Scripture to his own life and to the lives of others. Not only will this volume inform you, it will give you a model of devotion to Christ that we should all emulate.

Dr. Richard L. Pratt Jr.  
Third Millennium Ministries



# Preface

I AM PLEASED to have the opportunity here to publish another volume of *Selected Shorter Writings*. I pray that God will use it to edify its readers.

I am dedicating this book to Prof. James I. Packer, who has blessed the whole evangelical world for many years by his writings and teachings. I first heard of Dr. Packer around 1958 or '59, when I was a college student studying the arguments for the authority of Scripture. His *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*,<sup>1</sup> still in print today, was the first scholarly work I read that developed the case for biblical inspiration and inerrancy. Because of its clarity, cogency, and biblical authenticity, I went back to it often, and to his later works, such as *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*,<sup>2</sup> *Knowing God*,<sup>3</sup> *Concise Theology*,<sup>4</sup> *Keep in Step with the Spirit*,<sup>5</sup> and *A Quest for Godliness*.<sup>6</sup> I have also appreciated his attempt to maintain both uncompromising doctrinal orthodoxy and genuine ecumenism. That is a difficult balance to attain, and I have sought to follow his example.

More recently, he became aware of my work, and I am very grateful for his kind forewords to my *Doctrine of the Word of God*<sup>7</sup> and *Systematic Theology*.<sup>8</sup> So in God's providence, we have come full circle. My work is a tribute to Dr. Packer's theology, and his affirmation of mine has been one of the best things that has happened to me over the years. I

1. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958.
2. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012.
3. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993.
4. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2001.
5. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005.
6. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010.
7. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010.
8. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013.

am hoping that he will also enjoy the essays in this volume, particularly “Inerrancy: A Place to Live,” my plenary address to the Evangelical Theological Society, the approach of which is especially indebted to his work.

Most of the articles in this book are published here for the first time. The following are exceptions, and are used by permission of the original publishers:

- “Inerrancy: A Place to Live,” *JETS* 57, 1 (2014): 29–39.
- “No Scripture, No Christ,” *Synapse II* 1, 1 (January 1972), reprinted in *The Presbyterian Guardian* (January 1979): 10–11.
- “The Mystery of Creaturely Otherness,” available at <http://www.frame-poythress.org/the-mystery-of-creaturely-otherness/>.
- *Why Theology Needs Philosophy* (Mount Hermon, CA: Center for Cultural Leadership, 2013). See <http://www.christianculture.com>.
- “The Academic Captivity of Theology,” in *The Academic Captivity of Theology and Other Essays on Theological Education* (Lakeland, FL: Whitefield Publishers, 2012), 1–20.
- “Seminaries and Academic Accreditation,” in *ibid.*, 21–39.
- “The Demise of Systematic Theology,” in *ibid.*, 40–47.
- “Pratt’s Boot Camp,” in *For the World: Essays in Honor of Richard L. Pratt Jr.*, ed. Justin S. Holcomb and Glenn Lucke (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2014), 145–57.
- “Believing in God in the Twenty-first Century,” available at <http://www.frame-poythress.org/how-to-believe-in-god-in-the-2000s/>.
- “Epistemological Perspectives and Evangelical Apologetics,” available at <http://www.frame-poythress.org/epistemological-perspectives-and-evangelical-apologetics/>.
- “The Bible on the Problem of Evil,” available at <http://www.frame-poythress.org/the-bible-on-the-problem-of-evil/>.

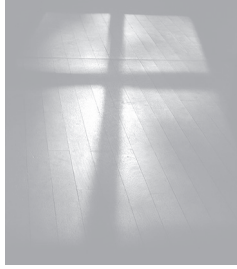
- “Van Til: His Simplicity and Profundity,” *Update* (March 1986): 1–2.
- “Cornelius Van Til,” in *Handbook of Evangelical Theologians*, ed. Walter Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 156–67.
- “Van Til: The Theologian,” originally published as “The Problem of Theological Paradox,” in *Foundations of Christian Scholarship*, ed. Gary North (Vallecito, CA: Ross House, 1976), 295–330; also published as a pamphlet, *Van Til: The Theologian* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Pilgrim, 1976).
- “Van Til on Antithesis,” *WTJ* 57, 1 (Spring 1995): 81–102.
- “But God Made Me This Way,” *Tabletalk* 21, 3 (March 1997): 8–11.
- “What Denomination Should I Join?,” *CRJ* 36, 2 (2013): 60–61.
- “Guidelines for Church Union,” *Presbyterian Journal* (August 24, 1983): 8–10.
- “Church Discipline,” *CRJ* 37, 4 (2014): 60–61.



# Abbreviations

<i>AGG</i>	John M. Frame, <i>Apologetics to the Glory of God: An Introduction</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1994)
<i>CRJ</i>	<i>Christian Research Journal</i>
<i>DCL</i>	John M. Frame, <i>The Doctrine of the Christian Life</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008)
<i>DKG</i>	John M. Frame, <i>The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987)
<i>DWG</i>	John M. Frame, <i>The Doctrine of the Word of God</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010)
<i>ER</i>	John M. Frame, <i>Evangelical Reunion: Denominations and the One Body of Christ</i> (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991)
<i>Institutes</i>	John Calvin, <i>Institutes of the Christian Religion</i> , ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960)
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>KJV</i>	King James Version
<i>NASB</i>	New American Standard Bible
<i>NIV</i>	New International Version
<i>NT</i>	New Testament
<i>OT</i>	Old Testament
<i>SSW<sub>1</sub></i>	John M. Frame, <i>Selected Shorter Writings, Volume 1</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2014)
<i>ST</i>	John M. Frame, <i>Systematic Theology</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013)

WCF	Westminster Confession of Faith
WLC	Westminster Larger Catechism
WSC	Westminster Shorter Catechism
<i>WTJ</i>	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>



# PART 1

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## *Theological Topics*





# 1

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## Inerrancy: A Place to Live

*This chapter was delivered as a plenary address to the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, November 19, 2013, published in JETS 57, 1 (2014): 29–39. (For stylistic purposes, this chapter has been copyedited for inclusion in this volume.)*

FOR PURPOSES of this paper, I define *inerrancy* simply as “propositional truth.” To say that a sentence is inerrant is simply to say that it is true, as opposed to false. To say that the Bible is inerrant is simply to say that it contains no false assertions.

Forty or fifty years ago, it was common for theologians to speak of biblical inerrancy as a “new” or “recent” doctrine. Their thesis was that although the church had always held to the authority of Scripture in a broad and general way, inerrancy was, as we like to say today, a product of modernity. Enlightenment rationalists had challenged the historicity and reliability of Scripture, and in reaction, according to this theory, orthodox Christians of the past two centuries or so insisted that Scripture was completely historical and reliable on all subjects it treats. That more pedantic and precise doctrine of biblical authority they called *inerrancy*. In this lecture I will not be discussing this issue, however, because I believe that the thesis that inerrancy is recent was thoroughly demolished by John D. Woodbridge in his book *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal*.<sup>1</sup>

1. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982. “Rogers/McKim Proposal” refers to Jack Rogers and Donald McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979).

Now, members of ETS have subscribed to inerrancy in this form: “The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written, and is therefore inerrant in the autographs.” So I assume that most of you here today believe the doctrine of inerrancy. You do not believe it to be a recent theory, a speculation, or overreaction to criticism, but to constitute one of the doctrines of orthodox Christianity. Further, since you believe that the doctrines of our faith are based on Scripture, you believe that the doctrine of biblical inerrancy is itself a biblical doctrine.

But of course, God’s Word is our life. Biblical doctrines are not just propositions that we occasionally sign our names to, or that we recite on demand. Rather, they constitute the environment in which we live. The doctrine of the deity of Christ, for example, is not just a test of orthodoxy, but a place to stand against temptation. When Satan tells us that he intends to rule our lives, we reply: No, you may not. For we do not trust in ourselves to stand against you in our own strength. We trust only in Christ, and Christ is God.

So similarly, the doctrine of biblical inerrancy provides us a place to stand, a way to live. The doctrine of inerrancy is often used among us as a reply to scientific, historical, or philosophical claims that seem to oppose the Bible, but that’s not its most important use, for mature Christians. When we read the first chapter of Genesis, our deepest impulse (not necessarily the first, but the deepest) is not to wonder how its descriptions can be reconciled with scientific ideas, but, like the deepest impulses of the psalmists, to praise God for doing something incredibly greater than we can comprehend, bringing all the universe into being, from nothing. When we read of Israel’s deliverance at the Red Sea, or Sea of Reeds, we have a slight interest in how the wind blew the water away. But our larger and more consuming interest is that we have a God so great that he can time the movements of the wind and water to deliver his people and judge his enemies.

This is to say that for us the accounts in Scripture of the mighty acts of God are not primarily problems to be solved, or stories that might have to be retold to make sense to some group of modern people. They are news, true accounts of what God has *done*, testifying also to

what a great God he *is*. Of course, the stories do now need to be retold to modern people, but what modern people most need to hear is what a great God our Lord is.

Some have complained that the doctrine of inerrancy is a distraction, taking us away from the great themes of creation and redemption, getting us tied up in minor details, such as how God could have made light before making the heavenly bodies that bear light, or where Cain got his wife, or the botanical properties of the mustard seed. It is true that inerrancy pertains to the details of Scripture. As we've always said, you can't draw a principled distinction between what is small in the Bible and what is large. And if God doesn't speak truly in earthly matters, how can we trust him in heavenly things?

But those within the community who confess inerrancy know that this doctrine encourages us most in the big themes. The inerrancy of the Word of God enables us to state with confidence the most extraordinary fact—that the whole world is God's, and displays his glory. It enables us to say that Jesus is really Lord, that he really saved us from sin and its consequences, and that he is coming again to restore the whole universe to something pure and even more beautiful. And inerrancy assures us that we have a God who speaks to us in our own experience—the Lord of language who knows how to use symbols to talk to human beings.

Modern secularism, for its part, is not primarily interested in niggling over details, however much it annoys Christians with these controversies. Unbelief is as skeptical of blood atonement as it is of whether water can become wine. The attack on inerrancy does not limit itself to details. It will not be satisfied until it has set to rest the idea that a man can be God, that he can die for the sins of others, that he can rise from the dead, that he can communicate clearly with us. But if we have settled the question of inerrancy, we can dispatch such questions in short order. Yes, a man is God, he died for our sins, he rose again, and he is coming again—because God told us that this story is true.

There is a place for detailed apologetics, but that is not where we live. Inerrancy is not primarily a doctrine about the little details, even though it embraces those. It is a place for us to live. It enables us to look at everything, in the Bible and outside, with a supernaturalistic

worldview. So when we are alone together, without skeptics looking over our shoulders, the inerrant Bible is, ironically, the most natural thing in the world. We argue about why in his miraculous healings Jesus used spittle in some cases, but not in others. But we don't argue about whether Jesus healed miraculously. We exchange perplexity about the line between temptation and sin, but we don't debate that Jesus was tempted as we are but did not sin. What the Bible clearly teaches must be true. God said it, we believe it, and that settles it.

If a skeptic questions whether five thousand people can be fed with five loaves and two fish, the answer is simple, however unpersuasive it might be to the inquirer: Of course this is possible, because God exists. This is God's world. So the highest laws of physics are his intentions. He therefore establishes the laws of nutrition as well, and if he wants to feed five thousand people miraculously for his own purposes, he is perfectly able to do that. And for that matter, if someone asks how a book written by human beings can be inerrant, the answer is the same: If God wants such a book, he can arrange to provide one. We live in a supernaturalistic world—God's world.

This kind of thinking enters into our more technical conversations as well. Say that a liberal scholar looks at the Mosaic law and asks, isn't it peculiar that this law, supposedly revealed by God, looks a lot like the law of Hammurabi? We reply, yes, that's interesting. He says, no, you miss the point. If the Mosaic law was revealed by God, then it should be unique, very different. It shouldn't look like the laws of the nations around Israel. So the similarity between Moses and Hammurabi indicates that the Mosaic law was not divinely inspired after all. If the law of Hammurabi can be explained without resorting to inspiration, the same can be done with the law of Moses.

Now, we should take this argument respectfully, because we should treat all human beings with respect and honor. Perhaps we may even take the argument with some level of academic seriousness. But in our heart of hearts, we cannot take it seriously. The fact is that this is God's world. If God wants to give his people laws that are in some ways like other laws, why should he not do that? He has not said that the mark of divine inspiration is some kind of striking uniqueness. Rather, he reveals

what he reveals for his own purposes and in his own way. Typically, he reveals truth in the language of human writers, writers who are both subjects of inspiration and human beings like us responding to their environment in their own way. In this case, of course the Israelite law is similar in some ways to the Babylonian laws, because the Israelites and the Babylonians lived in the same world and faced many of the same social problems. But of course, the Israelite law is unique in one respect that is repeated over and over again in Leviticus 19: its basis is “I am the LORD your God.”

Or take the so-called criterion of dissimilarity, used among some liberal NT scholars. A scholar might say that a statement attributed to Jesus in the Gospels cannot really be his because it is not sufficiently dissimilar to things said by later Christians. It is more likely, some would say, that the later Christians made it up than that Jesus originally said it. In other words, we should always assume that the words are a fabrication unless there is very strong evidence to the contrary. Again, we should greet this argument with politeness, but not with inner respect. We know Scripture is God’s Word. And when he speaks to us, he can choose to be as similar or dissimilar to other voices as he chooses. Given that worldview—dare I say *presupposition*—the criterion of dissimilarity carries no intellectual weight whatsoever. Indeed, it is bewildering that anyone ever advanced it. *Of course* Jesus’ sayings are like those of later Christians: because Jesus intended his teachings to guide the church after his ascension, and because many of the later Christians, at least, were faithful followers of his.

When you *believe* the Bible and read it with a believing heart, you find that it really makes sense as it is. It doesn’t need to be deconstructed or demythologized or verified. There is no need to posit a chronology different from what the Bible itself presents (though I grant that sometimes there are legitimate disagreements among faithful readers about what chronology the Bible does present). There is no need to multiply speculations about the supposed sources of the Pentateuch. There is no need to find naturalistic explanations for prophecies that are almost too accurate. There is no need to posit settings for the sayings of Jesus other than those presented in the Gospels.

When I first started reading the Bible seriously as a young Christian, of course I came very early to God’s creative word, “Let there be light.” It never occurred to me that there was a problem in reconciling the biblical account of the first creation day with that of the fourth. For his own purposes, God chose to create the sun, moon, and stars on the fourth day. But he created light on the first. As a young Christian, I found that to be perfectly normal. God is the author of light; indeed, he *is* light. Evidently he had the power to distribute light and darkness without planting it in material bodies. Why not? One more reason to praise his sovereign power.

But evidently when you read the Bible without a believing heart, without a worldview centered on an absolute tripersonal God, problems appear and multiply. Virtually nothing seems plausible. Everything needs to be explained or explained away.

So the rift between evangelicals and liberals is not only about the facts. It is also about the questions we ask, the projects we undertake, the methods we follow.

Which brings me to what is my favorite philosophical article in the last fifty years—no, rather, my favorite academic article on any subject, Alvin Plantinga’s 1984 article “Advice to Christian Philosophers.”<sup>2</sup> In the 2002 version of the preface, Plantinga indicates that his advice to Christian philosophers has applications to Christians working in other academic fields: “history, literary and artistic criticism, musicology and the sciences, both social and natural.”<sup>3</sup> In all these disciplines, there are, he says,

ways of proceeding, pervasive assumptions about the nature of the discipline . . . , assumptions about how the discipline should be carried on and what a valuable or worthwhile contribution is like, and so on; we imbibe these assumptions, if not with our mother’s milk, at any rate in learning how to pursue our disciplines. In all these areas we learn how to pursue our disciplines under the direction and influence

2. *Faith and Philosophy* 1 (October 1984; updated July 14, 2002): 1–19, available at <http://www.leaderu.com/truth/1truth10.html>.

3. *Ibid.*, 1.

of our peers. But in many cases these assumptions and presumptions do not easily mesh with a Christian or theistic way of looking at the world. This is obvious in many areas.<sup>4</sup>

Later, he says:

For the intellectual culture of our day is for the most part profoundly non-theistic and hence non-Christian—more than that, it is anti-theistic[,] . . . animated by a spirit wholly foreign to that of Christian theism.<sup>5</sup>

Here he mentions literary criticism, film theory, social sciences and history, and, at greater length, the natural sciences. But hidden in this list of disciplines where non-Christian assumptions prevail he mentions “a good deal of contemporary (liberal) theology.”<sup>6</sup> Some readers might find that jarring.

Of course, I don't, Plantinga doesn't, and probably most of you don't either. To notice that liberals do theology from non-Christian assumptions even though they are professing Christians is old hat to most of us as evangelical theologians. But just take a moment to think about this; let it strike you: it is possible to be deceived by a non-Christian worldview even when one is seeking to do Christian theology. It came as a huge shock to me when I came of age in the '50s and '60s to learn that some of the most famous and respected minds in the theological field rejected fundamental truths of Scripture. Many of these even rejected the fundamental supernatural worldview that Scripture presupposes: that the world is made and ruled by an absolute tripersonal God, who enters history whenever he wishes, to accomplish his purposes.

This is why certain ideas that seem eminently reasonable to us seem quite unreasonable to our academic colleagues. This is why for some scholars the story of Yahweh drying up the sea is an obvious alert to a

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*, 3.

6. *Ibid.*, 1. On page 3, he says that “even a good bit of allegedly Christian theology is animated by a spirit wholly foreign to that of Christian theism. I don't have the space here to elaborate and develop the point; but I don't have to, for it is familiar to you all.”

need for historical reconstruction. To them, there must be something mythological or legendary here, and the only controversy concerns the genesis of that myth, whether linguistic misunderstanding, factual misunderstanding, borrowing from another culture, an attempt to join diverse tribes into a national identity, or something else. We ask: Why should there even be a question here? If the absolute tripersonal God wants to give a great deliverance to his people in answer to prayer, why shouldn't he do it? The liberal replies: sorry, but that explanation is the one explanation that we cannot permit. So what is obvious to us is foolishness to them, and vice versa.

Although they usually try to be courteous to us, they really have very little respect for our worldview. They have become more courteous to us in the last fifty years or so than they were in the bad old days of the nineteenth century, but the basic antithesis is still there. For them, we are not guilty of an oversight here or a wrong emphasis there, the sorts of critiques most common in the academic world. We are outrageously wrong, laughably wrong—so wrong that our distinctive views are not even worth consideration. And what is outrageously wrong is not a specific thesis that we hold, but our whole worldview, as it impacts all the many specific theses.

Evangelicals have sometimes naively imagined that if only we could think a little more sharply and argue more cogently, we could convince the prominent liberal theologians that the Word of God is inerrant. But that kind of conversion almost never happens.<sup>7</sup> For the difference between the two positions is not the difference of an argument here or there, or this passage or that passage. It is a difference of presupposition, a difference of faith, a difference in heart orientation, accessible only to the power of the Holy Spirit. It is, of course, an interesting question why the Holy Spirit does not work more often to regenerate professional academics, but I won't digress to discuss it.

And so, although again we usually try to be courteous to our liberal colleagues (and we should be), in the end we think the same way about

7. I do have in mind the case of Eta Linnemann, the student of Bultmann and Fuchs, who became an ardent evangelical and opponent of the liberal theology. See her *Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology?*, trans. Robert W. Yarbrough (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990).



them that they think about us. They are not just wrong about this or that. They are holding and articulating a worldview that is impossible for us to countenance for even a moment. From our point of view, they are far out in left field; from their point of view, we are far out in right field.

From this stark, and certainly somewhat oversimplified, perspective we can see that evangelical scholarship faces a dilemma. In the rebuilding of evangelicalism following World War II, associated with such names as Carl F. H. Henry, Gordon H. Clark, Harold J. Ockenga, and Billy Graham were two great emphases: a renewed social conscience and an intellectual renewal. I will focus on the second of these, the intellectual renewal. That renewal can in turn be divided into two elements: first, a recommitment to the doctrinal standards of Christian orthodoxy, and second, a commitment to high academic standards. The recommitment to orthodoxy can be summarized in the affirmation of inerrancy. So in its early years the ETS used a simple doctrinal basis: “The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs.”<sup>8</sup> Later the Society added, “God is a Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each an uncreated person, one in essence, equal in power and glory.”<sup>9</sup>

The second element in the evangelical intellectual renewal was a commitment to high academic standards. It was felt that this had been a weakness in fundamentalism between the world wars. To restore academic integrity in the movement, it was hoped, would return evangelicalism to the respect that it had enjoyed in the nineteenth century when great scholars such as Ernst Hengstenberg, J. B. Lightfoot, Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, Charles Hodge, and B. B. Warfield defended the fundamentals of the faith, perhaps even to the status that orthodox Christianity had enjoyed in the Middle Ages, the Reformation, and the post-Reformation period.

But where could evangelicals go to challenge and elevate their academic standards? Colleges and universities, of course . . . and, to some extent, theological seminaries. In the postwar period, there were

8. <http://www.etsjets.org/about>, accessed December 10, 2012.

9. *Ibid.*

a number of colleges and seminaries, even a few universities, committed to Christian orthodoxy. But many of the postwar reformers thought these were not sufficient. Christian institutions did not have as high an academic reputation as those that were non-Christian, liberal, or secularist. It didn't make much sense for a young evangelical scholar to go to a Christian institution only to reinforce his existing academic standards. To give these a challenge and a lift, he needed to look liberalism and secularism in the eye, to get the experience of being with *real* scholars. For many evangelicals thought that however wrong liberalism was, its scholarship was nevertheless far superior to that in evangelicalism.

But what happened all too often was that the young scholar would return from his broadening experience with doubts about inerrancy and some sympathy for those who denied it. And as we have seen, that entailed sympathy for the naturalistic worldview that generated this rejection of inerrancy—even worse, an embracing of that worldview, or some kind of inconsistent halfway house between orthodoxy and naturalism. Such stories, I think, provide an explanation for the growing doubts about inerrancy that developed in evangelical circles during the 1960s and following years.

For these young scholars, alas, inerrancy was no longer a place to live. Naturalism was another place, and it had its attractions, among them greater academic respectability. Questions about the truth of the Bible are not hard to resolve for the supernaturalist or for the naturalist, but they are terribly difficult, emotionally agonizing, for people who are torn between worldviews. Such people cannot take anything as obvious. Everything is problematic. Perhaps they were taught as young people that Jesus made the lame to walk; but Prof. B. doubts it. For the young scholar, then, the Bible's teaching has an attraction, but we should respect Prof. B's doubts, possibly try to come to some sort of middle position. There might be some attractive arguments for a middle position, but it will never be home. It will never be a text for confident preaching, reassuring the people in the pews that Christ is our only comfort in life or in death.

This is not to suggest that we cannot learn from Prof. B, that his thinking cannot help us to formulate our own position with more biblical

accuracy and nuance. Only that an attempt to compromise between his naturalism and biblical orthodoxy will give us no place to speak with biblical confidence. We can learn from Prof. B.'s detailed observations, but not from his worldview.

But as I said, following Plantinga, the antithesis between these two worldviews is not only about facts, but also about methods, research proposals, questions appropriate for debate, indeed the nature of academic theological work, how we proceed as exegetes and theologians. On this subject as well, there is only so much that we can learn from secular colleges and universities. If our goal, like the goal of the postwar neoevangelicals, is to elevate our academic standards, then we need to think for ourselves as to what those academic standards should be, given our Christian theistic worldview, not just accept the standards of the secular establishment.

Here again, I think Plantinga's wisdom should guide us. Plantinga calls Christian philosophers

to display more autonomy—more independence of the rest of the philosophical world. Second, Christian philosophers must display more integrity in the sense of integral wholeness, or oneness, or unity, being all of one piece. Perhaps “integrality” would be the better word here. And necessary to these two is a third: Christian courage, or boldness, or strength, or perhaps Christian self-confidence. We Christian philosophers must display more faith, more trust in the Lord; we must put on the whole armor of God.<sup>10</sup>

If Plantinga can preach that way to fellow philosophers in an academic journal, I guess I can do the same to my fellow evangelical theologians in a meeting of the ETS.

He goes on to deal with the matter of method, by the example of a young Christian philosopher who returns from Ph.D. work at a secular institution to begin her own career. She tends, he says, to work on the same topics that were acceptable topics for her graduate seminars. He adds:

10. Plantinga, “Advice to Christian Philosophers,” 3.

And it is natural, furthermore, for her to work on [these topics] in the way she was taught to, thinking about them in the light of the assumptions made by her mentors and in terms of currently accepted ideas as to what a philosopher should start from or take for granted, what requires argument and defense, and what a satisfying philosophical explanation or a proper resolution to a philosophical question is like. She will be uneasy about departing widely from these topics and assumptions, feeling instinctively that any such departures are at best marginally respectable.<sup>11</sup>

Respectability is a major issue here. Our desire to raise the quality of our academic standards is a godly desire. Our desire to be academically respectable usually is not, though it is hard to separate from the good desire to meet higher standards. The apostle Paul does say that a church elder should be “well thought of by outsiders” (1 Tim. 3:7; cf. 1 Thess. 4:12). But the quest for respectability, a frequent quest in the history of Christian thought, is often motivated by an ungodly pride. Avoiding that is where the armor of God comes in, where we need to walk in the Spirit.

Applying these principles to the work of scholarship, Plantinga continues:

So the Christian philosopher has his own topics and projects to think about; and when he thinks about the topics of current concern in the broader philosophical world, he will think about them in his own way, which may be a *different* way. He may have to reject certain currently fashionable assumptions about the philosophic enterprise—he may have to reject widely accepted assumptions as to what are the proper starting points and procedures for the philosophical endeavor. And—and this is crucially important—the Christian philosopher has a perfect right to the point of view and prephilosophical assumptions he brings to philosophic work; the fact that these are not widely shared outside the Christian or theistic community is interesting but fundamentally irrelevant.<sup>12</sup>

11. *Ibid.*, 4.

12. *Ibid.*, 5.

Plantinga takes up the philosophical controversy over the verifiability criterion of meaning as an example. What happened was that logical-positivist philosophers (who had their greatest influence from the 1920s to the 1950s) argued that for any group of words to be “cognitively meaningful,” it had to be verifiable by methods akin to those of the natural sciences. They took it that the phrase “God exists” could not be verified in that way, so they declared it to be cognitively meaningless. That is, it was not true, nor even false. It was not even a meaningful sentence. Now, as Plantinga points out, many professing Christians were intimidated by this argument and tried various kinds of accommodations and concessions to positivism. But, he says,

Christian philosophers should have adopted a quite different attitude toward positivism and its verifiability criterion. What they should have said to the positivists is: “Your criterion is mistaken: for such statements as ‘God loves us’ and ‘God created the heavens and the earth’ are clearly meaningful; so if they aren’t verifiable in your sense, then it is false that all and only statements verifiable in that sense are meaningful.” Christian theism is true; if Christian theism is true, then the verifiability criterion is false; so the verifiability criterion is false.<sup>13</sup>

Plantinga does concede that if the positivists had offered *arguments* for the verifiability criterion, then Christians and others who disagreed would need to answer them. But he points out that in fact the positivists did not give any serious arguments for their criterion. Christian philosophers should have recognized that this emperor had no clothes.

Now, I don’t know what position Plantinga takes on biblical inerrancy. But I think the situation that evangelical theologians face today on that issue is similar to the situation that Christian philosophers faced over cognitive meaning. As I’ve said, the rejection of inerrancy is not a conclusion based on evidence or argument. It is a presupposition, an idea that *governs* liberal theological thought in

13. *Ibid.*, 7.

every discussion of a theological subject. It determines their methodology. It determines where they start, what they take for granted, what they think requires argument and defense, and what they will accept as a satisfying explanation or proper resolution to the question. As with the verifiability criterion, there is no *argument* for the liberal theologians' presupposition, at least no argument that avoids begging the question.

Similarly, our own acceptance of inerrancy is a presupposition. Some may wince at that, because we like to say that this conclusion is based at least in part on an inductive study of the data of the Bible. I agree that our conclusion is legitimately derived from this data. But not just any inductive study will do when we're studying this issue. The inductive study itself must be based on some assumptions. As we engage in it, we must ask whether to assume a theistic worldview or not. Do we assume that miracles are possible, or do we exclude them as a methodological necessity? Do we believe that predictive prophecy is possible? Those are yes-or-no questions; we cannot straddle them. And so the doctrine of inerrancy functions both as a presupposition and as a conclusion of our study—a kind of circularity. Just as the denial of inerrancy functions both as a presupposition and as a conclusion of the liberal argument.

Plantinga later in the paper quotes theologian David Tracy as saying:

For the new scientific morality, one's fundamental loyalty as an analyst of any and all cognitive claims is solely to those methodological procedures which the particular scientific community in question has developed.<sup>14</sup>

Plantinga replies:

I say *caveat lector*. I'm prepared to bet that this "new scientific morality" is like the Holy Roman Empire: it is neither new nor scientific, nor morally obligatory. . . . Even if there were a set of methodological procedures held in common by most philosophers, historians,

14. David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 7.

and social scientists, or most secular philosophers, historians, and social scientists, why should a Christian theologian give ultimate allegiance to them rather than, say, to God, or to the fundamental truths of Christianity?<sup>15</sup>

Those fundamental truths, I argue, are the necessary presuppositions of our theological work, just as they are, according to Plantinga, of Christian philosophy. If they are the starting point of Christian philosophy, how can they be anything less than the starting point of Christian theology?

To conclude, a few disclaimers:

- I'm not saying that we should not have theological conversations with liberals and secularist scholars. I am saying that we should frequently clarify these conversations by telling our conversation partners where we stand, how our disagreements are not only factual but methodological, how they are not only theological but pretheological.
- I'm not saying that liberal and secular theologians have nothing important to say to us. But I no longer look up to them as standards or criteria of intellectual excellence. Bultmann's argument that we cannot believe in angels because we fly in airplanes, one of the worst arguments ever set forth anywhere, settled that for me many years ago.
- I'm not saying that we should never study at liberal or secular universities, colleges, or seminaries. But when we do, we need to be far more aware of the depth of their prevalent opposition to what we hold dearest.
- And I'm certainly not saying that we should not try to improve our intellectual and academic standards. But I hope you will consider that raising our standards does not necessarily mean emulating those who oppose biblical Christianity. Indeed, the project of raising the intellectual standards of evangelicalism turns out to be far more complicated than we often imagine.

15. Plantinga, "Advice to Christian Philosophers," 12.

It requires us to think for ourselves, not just to seek or cite the approval of others.

- And it may turn out that some practices that we hoped would raise our academic fortunes are actually counterproductive or irrelevant. Is it a good thing for us to require seminary professors to have doctorates from “first-rate institutions”? I doubt it. Is it good for us to make preparation for the ministry an increasingly academic exercise, in schools accredited by secular agencies? I think not, but that’s another book.<sup>16</sup>

16. John M. Frame, *The Academic Captivity of Theology and Other Essays on Theological Education* (Lakeland, FL: Whitfield Publishers, 2012); the title essay is reprinted as chapter 6 in the present volume.



**S**hort, pointed essays summarize some of John Frame's central (and a few peripheral) ideas on Scripture, theological education, apologetics, ethics, and the church. The book begins with one of Frame's shortest and clearest presentations of inerrancy, the central aspect of the doctrine of Scripture.

"In comparison with the 'feast' of John Frame's major works, these are the 'nuggets.' They still offer vintage Frame, and I heartily recommend them for their wisdom, balance, and incisiveness. Some have a more personal, informal tone and will usefully complement Frame's major writings, especially for those who want to understand the connection of his writings to the person behind them."

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—JOHN BARBER, Pastor, Cornerstone Presbyterian Church; Adjunct Professor,  
Fine Arts, Saints Bible Institute

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