

The fourth volume in John Frame's Theology of Lordship series, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, is the best of them—and that is high praise. In a 700-page “draft” of what he hopes will be a longer and more definitive work, Frame thinks through what Scripture is, what authority means, how to understand inspiration, canon, and a host of other categories intrinsic to any responsible treatment of revelation, especially the revelation provided by Holy Scripture. Frame's style is highly personal, occasionally sliding all the way to an almost stream-of-consciousness set of associations, but his reflections are invariably so fresh (even when he is articulating old truths) and so thought-provoking (not least where one wants to demur or introduce a caveat) that this reader, at least, overlooks the style he would otherwise have found a bit cloying. More so than the other volumes in the series, this book works hard at developing its theology, the theology of the word of God, out of Scripture itself—and without descending to vicious circularity. This is an important book, and those who write on this subject in the near future without wrestling with Frame will merely testify to their own narrowness.

—**D. A. Carson**, Research Professor of New Testament,
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, IL

I thank God for raising up John Frame in our day. We are the wiser, the more biblical, and the healthier because of it. And because he has written so deeply and so well about such great truths about a great God, this will, I believe, be the testimony of generations to come.

—**John Piper**, Pastor for Preaching and Vision,
Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis

Too often, the Bible is considered an academic text to be evaluated, rather than a Scripture to guide our piety. This book goes a long way toward correcting that mistake. And what a feast it is! To be sure, it leaves no stone unturned. Just about every significant issue connected with God's Word is tackled with clarity and with faithfulness to the highest view of biblical authority. Still, this is far more than a solid apologetic for inspiration and inerrancy. John Frame pleads for the “personal-word model” of the sacred text. With enormous wisdom and cogency, he leads the reader to discover the wonder of the Scripture, and thus to discover the wondrous love of its magnificent author, the Lord God himself.

—**William Edgar**, Professor of Apologetics, Westminster
Theological Seminary, Philadelphia

John Frame's course on the doctrine of the Word of God had a profound influence on me as a student at Westminster Seminary in 1971, and it has significantly affected my understanding of theology for my entire life. I am thrilled to see that Frame's excellent material is finally being published for a wider audience.

—**Wayne Grudem**, Research Professor of Theology and
Biblical Studies, Phoenix Seminary

Frame's work offers rich, vigorous, deep, biblically sound exposition of the Bible's own teaching about the word of God and about the Bible's character as the written Word of God. We have needed this vigorous defense of orthodoxy, which answers modernist deviations and now deviations cropping up even within evangelicalism. I highly commend it as a fitting capstone to Frame's *Theology of Lordship* series.

—**Vern S. Poythress**, Professor of New Testament Interpretation,
Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia

John Frame's fourth (possibly final) contribution to his *Theology of Lordship* series evidences this septuagenarian theologian's lifetime study of God's word. While writing in the spirit of Warfield, Young, Murray, and Van Til, the author freely merges his own (sometimes provocative or contemporary) thinking into the foundational works from previous generations. Commendably, he aspires to be presuppositional, exegetical, expositional, and Reformed in his conclusions and applications. This monumental volume certainly qualifies as a "must-read" for advanced students of theology.

—**Richard Mayhue**, Senior Vice President and Dean,
The Master's Seminary, Sun Valley, CA

John Frame's *Doctrine of the Word of God* is, by his own reckoning, his magnum opus, and I wholeheartedly agree. It is a rare event when evangelical theologians publish primary rather than secondary texts, but Frame has done it with this work—a constructive proposal that is as creative as it is conservative, "something close to biblicism" concerning the Bible itself. He has kept references to other theologians to a minimum (mainly confined to the several appendices) in order to focus on the biblical text itself, the personal Word of God. This book is a fitting capstone not only to Frame's *Theology of Lordship* series but also to his whole career. It demands not only our admiration but, more importantly, our attention. Those who do take up and read will come away with an expanded and enhanced vision of biblical authority and a renewed confidence in Scripture as the compelling personal communication of the triune Lord.

—**Kevin J. Vanhoozer**, Blanchard Professor of Theology,
Wheaton College Graduate School, Wheaton, IL

In my estimation, there has never been a book that deals with the word of God so carefully, thoroughly, and practically. I cannot imagine a follower of Christ who will not be transformed into a more humble and loyal disciple by pondering its wisdom. The content is up to date, exegetical, and systematic. The style is crystal clear. You will never forget this book.

—**Richard L. Pratt Jr.**, Third Millennium Ministries, Fern Park, FL

I trust John Frame! I am a cynical old preacher and trust comes hard; but when John Frame speaks or writes, I trust him—his mind, his heart, and his

faithfulness. But mostly I trust the God whom John Frame worships with such passion. A case in point is *The Doctrine of the Word of God*. This (along with the three other volumes in this series) will be one of the most valuable books in your library, and you'll rise up and call me blessed for recommending it to you.

—**Steve W. Brown**, Professor of Preaching Emeritus,
Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando

A distinguished teacher and author for over four decades, John gives us a wonderful fourth volume in his Theology of Lordship series. The book is accessible, concise, and saturated with Scripture. I heartily recommend his description of how God's word, in all its aspects, is his personal communication with us, with echoes of John's own lifelong faithfulness to the Lord.

—**J. Lanier Burns**, Research Professor of Theological Studies,
Senior Professor of Systematic Theology, Dallas Theological Seminary

I am delighted to recommend John Frame's *Doctrine of the Word of God*. It is a fitting finale to the Theology of Lordship series. Frame has profited much from the biblical theology of Vos, Murray, Kline, and Clowney; the result here is, as it is in his other books, a deeply biblical account of his subject. God's covenants are never far from the discussion. John is equally at home in biblical exegesis and in resolving the questions of our uncertain times regarding Scripture. Easy to read, yet penetrating, the argument carries us along. I especially admire John's "personal-word model" of Scripture. After reading DWG, students will be convinced of the sovereign power, truthfulness, and authority of the Bible. Even in areas where I question some of John's views, such as the usefulness of confessions of faith, I was encouraged and challenged to follow Holy Scripture more faithfully. Thank you, John, for this book!

—**Howard Griffith**, Associate Professor of Systematic Theology and
Academic Dean, Reformed Theological Seminary, Washington DC

We all need to read John Frame. At different times, he provokes, informs, irritates, illuminates, and excites. He is—thankfully!—not easily categorized, and therefore he must be wrestled with and not simply embraced or dismissed. This is the case in his most recent offering in his massive Theology of Lordship series. In some ways, Frame is at his best when exploring questions of methodology and the dynamics of revelation. In *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, Frame approaches issues in a fresh and stimulating way, anchored in classic Reformed orthodoxy, but often asking unexpected questions or giving surprising analysis and reaction. Yes, supporters and opponents should read this volume by John Frame because it proves to be a truly significant addition to literature on the Word of God.

—**Kelly M. Kapic**, Professor of Theological Studies,
Covenant College. Lookout Mountain, GA

When I first began teaching systematic theology nearly thirty years ago, one of the first things I did was to contact the bookstore of Westminster Seminary California to order several of the syllabi of John Frame on the various heads of theology. I considered him a leader in theological thinking then, and all these years later, I still do. I have often thought of him as something like a combination of a meticulous brain-surgeon and a keen-nosed bloodhound. With deep biblical faith and massive erudition in the entire Christian theological tradition, he painstakingly reads all the relevant material and clearly isolates the matters at hand. He does not then “cut or bite,” but rather fairly and charitably reveals each problem or issue in light of the ever-new, ever-ancient biblical faith. He never jumps to conclusions, and always seeks to believe the best about those who may be opponents, without relinquishing honesty and realism in the process.

I will be using this book in my own classes and teaching, and I am delighted to have such a rich resource to hand.

—**Douglas F. Kelly**, Professor of Systematic Theology,
Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte

In many ways, Frame’s *Doctrine of the Word of God* is the crowning achievement of his career. If Barth was designated the theologian of revelation, Moltmann the theologian of eschatology, and Cullmann the theologian of salvation history, Frame could rightly be labeled the theologian of the Bible. No theologian in recent memory has more frequently and doggedly held up the Bible as the divine norm for all human thought and action; and no English bibliology in the last century matches the present work in scope, fervor, logic, and fidelity to the Bible’s view of itself. This work is an evangelical landmark, likely to be unsurpassed for generations.

—**P. Andrew Sandlin**, Center for Cultural Leadership,
Church of the King, Santa Cruz

The Doctrine of the Word of God strengthened my faith in the authority, the sufficiency, and the thorough jurisdiction of God’s Word in my daily life. I cannot ask for more from any human book.

—**Andrée Seu**, Senior Writer, *WORLD* Magazine

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*In Memory of
Edmund P. Clowney
(1917–2005)*

And he gave to Moses, when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God. (Ex. 31:18)

Now this is the commandment, the statutes and the rules that the LORD your God commanded me to teach you, that you may do them in the land to which you are going over, to possess it, that you may fear the LORD your God, you and your son and your son's son, by keeping all his statutes and his commandments, which I command you, all the days of your life, and that your days may be long. Hear therefore, O Israel, and be careful to do them, that it may go well with you, and that you may multiply greatly, as the LORD, the God of your fathers, has promised you, in a land flowing with milk and honey.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut. 6:1–9)

This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success. (Josh. 1:8)

The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. (Ps. 19:7–11)

In God, whose word I praise, in the LORD, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me? (Ps. 56:10–11)

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. (Matt. 5:17–19)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. (John 1:1–3)

Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. (John 6:68)

Scripture cannot be broken. (John 10:35)

If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord. (1 Cor. 14:37)

From childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:15–17)

And we have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. (2 Peter 1:19–21)

Jesus loves me, this I know,
For the Bible tells me so;
Little ones to him belong,
They are weak, but he is strong.

Yes, Jesus loves me! [3×]
The Bible tells me so. *[repeat after each verse]*

Jesus loves me, he who died,
Heaven's gates to open wide;
He will wash away my sin,
Let his little child come in.

Jesus loves me, loves me still,
Though I'm very weak and ill;
From his shining throne on high
Comes to watch me where I lie.

Jesus loves me, he will stay
Close beside me all the way:
If I love him, when I die
He will take me home on high.¹

1. "Jesus Loves Me, This I Know," by Anna B. Warner, 1859.

Contents

Analytical Outline	xiii
Foreword	xxiii
Preface	xxvii
Abbreviations	xxxii
PART ONE: ORIENTATION	
1. The Personal-Word Model	3
2. Lordship and the Word	8
PART TWO: GOD'S WORD IN MODERN THEOLOGY	
3. Modern Views of Revelation	15
4. Revelation and Reason	21
5. Revelation and History	26
6. Revelation and Human Subjectivity	34
7. Revelation and God Himself	40
PART THREE: THE NATURE OF GOD'S WORD	
8. What Is the Word of God?	47
9. God's Word as His Controlling Power	50
10. God's Word as His Meaningful Authority	54
11. God's Word as His Personal Presence	63
PART FOUR: HOW THE WORD COMES TO US	
12. The Media of God's Word	71
13. God's Revelation through Events	75
14. God's Revelation through Words: The Divine Voice	82
15. God's Revelation through Words: Prophets and Apostles	87

16. The Permanence of God's Written Word	101
17. God's Written Words in the Old Testament	105
18. Respect for God's Written Words in the Old Testament	112
19. Jesus' View of the Old Testament	118
20. The Apostles' View of the Old Testament	121
21. The New Testament as God's Written Words	129
22. The Canon of Scripture	133
23. The Inspiration of Scripture	140
24. The Content of Scripture	145
25. Scripture's Authority, Its Content, and Its Purpose	163
26. The Inerrancy of Scripture	167
27. The Phenomena of Scripture	177
28. Bible Problems	183
29. The Clarity of Scripture	201
30. The Necessity of Scripture	210
31. The Comprehensiveness of Scripture	216
32. The Sufficiency of Scripture	220
33. The Transmission of Scripture	239
34. Translations and Editions of Scripture	253
35. Teaching and Preaching	258
36. Sacraments	264
37. Theology	272
38. Confessions, Creeds, Traditions	280
39. Human Reception of Scripture	289
40. The Interpretation of Scripture	292
41. Assurance	297
42. Person-Revelation: The Divine Witness	304
43. Human Beings as Revelation	316
44. Writing on the Heart	320
45. Summary and Organizational Reflections	328
46. Epilogue	332
Appendix A: Antithesis and the Doctrine of Scripture	335
Appendix B: Rationality and Scripture	347
Appendix C: Review of Richard Muller, <i>The Study of Theology</i>	371
Appendix D: Dooyeweerd and the Word of God	392

Appendix E: God and Biblical Language: Transcendence and Immanence	422
Appendix F: Scripture Speaks for Itself	440
Appendix G: Review of John Wenham, <i>Christ and the Bible</i>	463
Appendix H: Review of David Kelsey, <i>The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology</i>	466
Appendix I: Review of <i>The Nature and Extent of Biblical Authority: Christian Reformed Church, Report 44</i>	490
Appendix J: Review of Peter Enns, <i>Inspiration and Incarnation</i>	499
Appendix K: Review of N. T. Wright, <i>The Last Word</i>	517
Appendix L: Review of Andrew McGowan, <i>The Divine Spiration of Scripture</i>	525
Appendix M: Review of Norman Geisler, ed., <i>Biblical Errancy</i>	554
Appendix N: No Scripture, No Christ	563
Appendix O: In Defense of Something Close to Biblicism: Reflections on <i>Sola Scriptura</i> and History in Theological Method	567
Appendix P: Traditionalism	601
Appendix Q: The Spirit and the Scriptures	615
Bibliography	641
Index of Names	655
Index of Subjects	659
Index of Scripture	672

Analytical Outline

PART ONE: ORIENTATION

1. The Personal-Word Model
 - A. A Thought-Experiment
 - B. God's Personal Speech Pervades Scripture
 - C. Meaning of *Authoritative*
 - D. The Very Nature of the Christian Life
 - E. How Do We Find These Words Today?
 - (1) Questions of Canon
 - (2) Questions of Hermeneutics
 - F. Modern Denials
 - G. The Answers Will Come from Scripture
2. Lordship and the Word
 - A. The Biblical God Unique
 - (1) Absolute Personality
 - (2) Creator-Creature Distinction
 - (3) Covenant Lord: Control, Authority, Presence
 - B. Perspectives
 - (1) Normative
 - (2) Situational
 - (3) Existential
 - C. The Word Bears the Lordship Attributes

PART TWO: GOD'S WORD IN MODERN THEOLOGY

3. Modern Views of Revelation
 - A. Human Autonomy Central to Modern Views
 - B. Rationalism and Irrationalism
 - C. Compromises with Autonomy in Christian Theology
 - D. Beginnings of the Liberal View of Scripture

4. Revelation and Reason
 - A. Reason Itself a Good Gift of God
 - B. Reason Affected by Sin
 - C. Logical Reasoning Presupposes God
 - D. Reason Is a Test of Divine Truth, if Done Right
 - E. Reason Goes Astray When It Assumes Autonomy
 - F. Circularity of True Reasoning
 - G. Limitation of Our Creatureliness
5. Revelation and History
 - A. History Is a Rational Study
 - B. Centrality of History a Unique Feature of Biblical Revelation
 - C. Divine Words Necessary to the Interpretation of Events
 - D. Modern Theologians Try to Interpret History Autonomously
 - E. Barth on *Historie* and *Geschichte*
 - F. Lessing's Big Ditch
 - G. Solution to These Problems: Renounce Autonomy
6. Revelation and Human Subjectivity
 - A. Schleiermacher: Autonomous Reasoning *about* the Inner Life
 - B. Kierkegaard, Barth, and Others
 - C. Reformed Theology: Both Objective and Subjective Revelation
 - D. Objective and Subjective Senses of "Revelation"
7. Revelation and God Himself
 - A. "God Doesn't Reveal Information; He Reveals Himself"
 - B. Barth's View
 - C. The Identity of Revelation with Christ Doesn't Exclude the Authority of Personal Words

PART THREE: THE NATURE OF GOD'S WORD

8. What Is the Word of God?
 - A. The Word Is All of God's Communications
 - B. It Is Also God Himself
9. God's Word as His Controlling Power
 - A. Creation and Providence
 - B. His Words to People

- (1) Judgment
 - (2) Blessing
 - C. Word and Spirit
 - D. The Power of the Word Is God's Own Omnipotence
10. God's Word as His Meaningful Authority
- A. Meaning and Power
 - B. God's Word in the History of Redemption
 - (1) Adam and Eve
 - (2) Noah
 - (3) Abraham
 - (4) Jesus
11. God's Word as His Personal Presence
- A. God's Nearness to His People Is the Nearness of His Words
 - B. Where the Word Is, There Is God's Spirit
 - C. God Performs All His Actions through Speech
 - D. God Is Distinguished from All Other Gods because He Is the God Who Speaks
 - E. The Persons of the Trinity Are Distinguished from One Another in Scripture according to Their Role in the Divine Speech
 - F. The Speech of God Has Divine Attributes
 - G. The Word Does Things that Only God Can Do
 - H. The Word of God Is an Object of Worship
 - I. The Word Is God

PART FOUR: HOW THE WORD COMES TO US

12. The Media of God's Word
- A. Events, Words, and Persons
 - B. The Humanity of Media Never Detracts from the Power, Authority, and Divine Presence of God's Word
 - (1) Human Beings Do Not *Necessarily* Err
 - (2) If Humanity Necessarily Entails Error, Then All of God's Revelation through Humans Is Erroneous
 - (3) Christ Was Fully Human, but He Did Not Err
 - (4) No Suggestion in Scripture that Humanity Detracts from God's Word

- (5) Human Language Is Not Unfit for the Divine Word
- (6) The Humanity of God's Word Is Not a Liability but a Perfection

- 13. God's Revelation through Events
 - A. Nature and General History
 - B. Redemptive History

- 14. God's Revelation through Words: The Divine Voice
 - A. Definition of *Inspiration*
 - B. Relation of Words to Events
 - C. The Divine Voice in Scripture
 - D. Our Response to the Divine Voice: How Should We Identify It?

- 15. God's Revelation through Words: Prophets and Apostles
 - A. Moses as the Model Prophet
 - B. Authority of the Prophet
 - C. Other Prophets in Both Testaments
 - D. The Authority of the Apostles
 - E. How Should We Identify True Prophets?
 - F. Prophecy and Historical Contingencies

- 16. The Permanence of God's Written Word
 - A. Covenant Memorials
 - B. Tradition in the New Testament
 - C. Barth on "Recollection and Expectation"

- 17. God's Written Words in the Old Testament
 - A. The Generations
 - B. The Covenant Document
 - C. Written Prophecy
 - D. Wisdom

- 18. Respect for God's Written Words in the Old Testament
 - A. The Covenant Document as Israel's Constitution
 - B. Deuteronomy, Joshua
 - C. The Psalter

- 19. Jesus' View of the Old Testament
 - A. Jesus Subject to the Old Testament

- B. Jesus Cites the Old Testament as Authoritative
 - (1) Authoritative Formulae
 - (2) Explicit Teaching
- 20. The Apostles' View of the Old Testament
 - A. Authoritative Citation Formulae
 - B. *Scripture* and *God* Interchangeable
 - C. Teachings about Scripture
- 21. The New Testament as God's Written Words
 - A. The New Covenant Parallel to the Old
 - B. The Authority of the Apostles' Written Words
- 22. The Canon of Scripture
 - A. The Early Church
 - B. Assumptions
 - C. Old Testament: The Books Recognized by Jews at the Time of Jesus' Ministry
 - D. New Testament: God's Expressed Intentions
 - E. Objective and Subjective Criteria
 - F. Closing of the Canon (Two Senses)
- 23. The Inspiration of Scripture
 - A. Definition of *Inspiration*
 - B. Mode of Inspiration
 - (1) Dictation?
 - (2) Organic
 - C. Plenary, Verbal, and Textual Inspiration
- 24. The Content of Scripture
 - A. The Covenant Model
 - B. Covenant and the Unity of Scripture
 - C. Pervasiveness of Covenantal Themes throughout Scripture
 - D. Complementarity of Covenantal Themes
 - (1) Person and Proposition
 - (2) Act and Word
 - (3) Grace and Law
 - (4) Love and Law
 - (5) Redemptive Focus and Comprehensive Application

- (6) Judgment and Blessing
 - (7) God's Word and Man's Response
 - (8) History and Eschatology
 - (9) Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility
 - (10) Nature and Scripture
 - E. Perspectival Relation of Elements to One Another
 - F. Conclusion
25. Scripture's Authority, Its Content, and Its Purpose
- A. *The Nature and Extent of Biblical Authority*
 - B. Ways in Which Scripture's Authority Is Derivable from Its Content
 - C. Ways in Which It Is Not
26. The Inerrancy of Scripture
- A. Meaning of *Inerrancy* and *Infallibility*
 - B. Deductive Argument for Biblical Inerrancy
 - C. Explicit Statements of Scripture: God's Word Is Truth
 - D. Truth and Precision
 - E. Scripture Makes Good on Its Claims
 - F. "Qualifications" of Inerrancy Merely Set Forth Its Meaning
 - (1) Unrefined Grammar
 - (2) Nonchronological Narrative
 - (3) Nonverbatim Quotations
27. The Phenomena of Scripture
- A. The Purpose of Scripture Cannot Be Limited to Salvation
 - B. The Nature of Christian Faith Is to Believe Despite Difficulties
 - C. Never Resort to Human Autonomy
 - D. Confronted with Problems, Remember Our Finitude and Sin
28. Bible Problems
- A. Bible Difficulties Not a Recent Discovery
 - B. Theological Problems
 - C. Ethical Problems
 - D. Factual Problems
 - E. Problems of Factual Consistency
 - F. Problems of Quotations and References

- G. Historical Problems
 - H. Genre
 - I. Scientific Problems
 - J. Problems of Date, Authorship, Setting
29. The Clarity of Scripture
- A. Attributes of Scripture: Power, Authority, Clarity
 - B. Westminster Confession of Faith 1.7
 - C. As Lord, God Has Power to Speak Clearly
 - D. Clarity and Authority: Our Responsibilities to God
 - E. Clarity and Divine Presence: The Word Is Near
30. The Necessity of Scripture
- A. Insufficiency of Natural Revelation
 - B. Permanent Revelation Necessary to the Covenant
 - C. Without Scripture, No Lord, No Salvation
 - D. Proposal for a Reformation
31. The Comprehensiveness of Scripture
- A. God Speaks in Scripture to All Areas of Life
 - B. Comprehensive Demand on the Believer's Life
32. The Sufficiency of Scripture
- A. Confessional Formulation: Westminster Confession of Faith 1.6
 - B. Biblical Basis
 - C. General and Particular Sufficiency
 - D. The Use of Extrabiblical Data
 - E. The Logic of Application
 - F. Challenges to the Sufficiency of Scripture
 - (1) Traditional
 - (2) Contemporary
33. The Transmission of Scripture
- A. Steps in Bringing the Word to Us
 - B. What Is an Autograph?
 - C. Is the Limitation of Inerrancy to Autographs Biblical?
 - D. But Don't Biblical Writers Cite Copies as God's Word?
 - E. Is This Limitation an Apologetic Dodge?
 - F. Does This Limitation Make Inerrancy a Dead Letter?

- G. Why Did God Allow the Autographs to Be Lost?
 - H. Why Did God Not Give Us Perfect Copies?
 - I. Isn't Any Loss a Serious Loss?
34. Translations and Editions of Scripture
- A. God Translates His Own Language for Us, without Distortion
 - B. Scripture Never Suggests that Translation Lessens Its Authority
 - (1) Translation from Early to Later Hebrew
 - (2) God's Sovereignty over Language
 - (3) God's Worldwide Mandates: Genesis 1:28 and Matthew 28:19
 - (4) Babel and Pentecost
 - (5) The Gospel Is for Every Language
 - C. Imperfect Translations Can Be Means of Communicating God's Word
 - D. We Need Different Translations for Different Purposes
 - E. The Value of Editions and Study Bibles
35. Teaching and Preaching
- A. Biblical Terms for Teaching and Preaching
 - B. Instruction in Christian Worship Services
 - C. Is Preaching "Central"?
 - D. Illustrations and Applications
36. Sacraments
- A. Sacraments as Media of the Word of God
 - B. Three Perspectives on Sacraments
 - C. Baptism
 - D. The Lord's Supper
 - E. Visible Words
37. Theology
- A. Definition
 - B. Theology in Life Decisions
 - C. Kinds of Theology
 - D. Theological Method
 - E. Theology as Communication of the Word of God
38. Confessions, Creeds, and Tradition
- A. Good and Bad Tradition

- B. Tradition Unavoidable
 - C. Importance of Avoiding Traditionalism
 - D. Creeds and Confessions
 - (1) Should They Be Used as Tests of Orthodoxy?
 - (2) Reactive and Proactive Doctrinal Discipline
 - (3) Dangers of Strict Subscription
39. Human Reception of Scripture
- A. Objective and Subjective Revelation
 - B. Recipients of the Word
 - C. The Response God Expects
40. The Interpretation of Scripture
- A. Interpretation as Application
 - B. How Can We Understand Texts from Cultures and Times Far from Our Own?
 - (1) Scripture Interprets Itself
 - (2) The Work of the Spirit
41. Assurance
- A. Assurance by God's Personal Word
 - B. God's Word as Our Presupposition
 - C. The Cone of Certainty
 - D. Certainty and Doubt
 - E. The Spirit and the Word
42. Person-Revelation: The Divine Witness
- A. The Idea of Person-Revelation
 - B. Divine and Human Person-Revelation
 - C. Theophany
 - D. Christ, the Mediator of All Revelation
 - E. The Work of the Holy Spirit
 - (1) The Spirit as Lord and Savior
 - (2) The Spirit as the Teacher of the Church
 - (3) Inspiration
 - (4) Illumination
 - (5) Demonstration
 - (6) Indwelling

- F. Epistemology and the Spirit's Witness
 - (1) Causes and Reasons for Faith
 - (2) Evidences and the Spirit's Witness
 - G. The Spirit and the Sufficiency of Scripture
43. Human Beings as Revelation
- A. The Image of God
 - B. Imitation of Christ
 - C. Imitation of the Apostles
 - D. Imitation of Church Leaders
 - E. Imitation of All Believers
44. Writing on the Heart
- A. God's Name upon His People
 - B. Writing of God's Word on the Heart
 - C. Revelation as Subjective Communication
45. Summary and Organizational Reflections
- A. Summaries of Book Chapters
 - B. General, Special, and Existential Revelation
46. Epilogue
- A. Why This Book Is Not "Progressive"
 - B. Some New Ideas in the Book
 - C. God as the One with Whom We Have to Do

Foreword

Recently a former student wrote to me as follows:

Dr. Packer, is there a reasonably recent work on the nature of Scripture that you would consider “magisterial” or close to indispensable, other than the Bible?

At that time, I could not name a book that met these specifications. But now I can, and this is it.

It concludes a heavyweight group of four, together titled *A Theology of Lordship*. The earlier items were *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, *The Doctrine of God*, and *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*. *The Doctrine of the Word of God* crowns the design it completes. The author ventures the opinion, “I think this book is my best work ever,” and I agree. Clinically and climactically, it rounds off the series, which in broad terms has focused on the word of God from the start. Pulling together threads from the previous volumes into a single systematic survey, it now stands on its own, as something of a landmark in its own right. I count it a huge privilege to introduce so good a book.

It must be all of sixty years since I picked up, from James Denney as I recall, the thought that in teaching systematic theology, the doctrine of Holy Scripture will ideally be handled twice—once at the start, to establish epistemology and method; and once at the end, to integrate the full wisdom about Scripture as a product, instrument, and conveyor of God that the process of gathering and synthesizing its overall, multiform doctrinal content has brought to light. Denney never attempted this himself, and indeed the Ritschlian streak in his thought would have made it impossible for him to do it coherently. I have never tried it, nor has any instructor I know. But although this was not John Frame’s conscious agenda, it is pretty much what he has actually achieved. Epistemology and methodology begin the series, and Denney’s proposed return to full-scale bibliology completes it. And the job, first to last, has been done thoroughly and well.

Frame has taught in conservative Reformed seminaries for over forty years, among his other labors going over the doctrine of the word of God in some form annually. He has won himself many admirers in his own circle,

but in the wider evangelical and Christian world his influence has not been great. The Lordship series, and this book in particular, will, I hope, change that. For here we find breadth and precision, lucid accessibility, disciplined theocentricity, alertness to real questions, analytical depth, consistent commonsensical Christian wisdom, and wholehearted faithfulness to the written Word, all coalescing into a convincing and heartening worldview before the argument is done. Two of the book's special excellences call for separate mention here.

First, the "big idea" that holds everything in this big book together is *pastoral*, and that to my mind is as it should be. As I was writing this foreword, I learned of a Chinese lady, a seventy-year-old watermelon grower named Jin, who said, "Reading the Bible is like having God talk to you." This is precisely the truth that Frame follows through, start to finish, angling it, as one would expect, in his own ministerial-formatational way. In his opening paragraph he writes:

The main contention of this volume is that God's speech to man . . . is very much like one person speaking to another. . . . My thesis is that God's word, in all its qualities and aspects, is a personal communication from him to us.

Elsewhere he states that *person-revelation* is his theme, and he maintains this theme as the necessary framework within which all sound theologizing does and must take place. The profound rightness of this approach is surely obvious.

Second, the complex specifics of God and godliness as the Bible presents them are here set forth in terms of the triadic *perspectivalism* that has become John Frame's trademark. In this conceptuality, each item in each triad is distinct yet inseparable from the other two, and must always be linked with them. For Frame holds that we have here an analogical shadow of what Scripture tells us about our triune Creator, the so-called economic Trinity, within whose unity the Father initiates, the Son mediates, and the Holy Spirit effectuates, all three acting together at all times. So the sovereignty—that is, the lordship—of God entails control, authority, and presence. God's revelation to us involves event, word, and person, and thus is in itself circumstantial, verbal, and relational, while from our standpoint as recipients it is normative, situational, and existential. And response to revelation embraces belief, obedience, and participation, all together. Biblically grounded and theologically focused, these thought-diagrams that Frame gives us will stretch minds and clarify vision, very much to Christians' advantage. The same must be said of Frame's mapping of theology as

application of God's Word to our lives. The perspectives that perspectivalism highlights are in truth integral to the God-man relationship, and should be prized as such.

So where are we? "Magisterial"? Yes. "Close to indispensable"? Yes again. Would John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, Abraham Kuyper, and B. B. Warfield, Reformed theology's Fabulous Four (in my book, anyway), enthuse about this volume as I have done? Pretty much, I think.

There, I have had my say. Now read on, and taste the good food for yourself.

J. I. Packer

Preface

I turned seventy in April 2009. My father died at age seventy-one, in 1980. They discovered that he had acute leukemia, and he was gone in six months. So I find myself more and more often calculating the implications of mortality. I am not morose, and for now I am in good health. I believe in Jesus Christ and anticipate a glorious reunion with him before too long. But while I am here, I need to put a fresh emphasis on redeeming the time. There are a lot of affairs I would like to put in order, if God wills. This book is one of them.

I have published three big fat books in the series *A Theology of Lordship*. These are *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God (DKG)*, *Doctrine of God (DG)*, and *Doctrine of the Christian Life (DCL)*. The present volume, *DWG*, is the final planned volume of the series. In a way, I have been planning this book longer than the others. I worked on the doctrine of revelation and Scripture during my doctoral program at Yale (alas, leaving the dissertation unfinished). Through forty-one years as a seminary teacher, I have taught *Doctrine of the Word of God* as a locus of systematic theology every year, and I have written a great many articles and book reviews on this subject. I have accumulated about six hundred pages of reading notes on the literature of the field, typed, single-spaced, and concise. I have long hoped to finish *DWG* before God takes me home.

But there are many other things to do, and writing such a big book is a large job. About fifteen years elapsed between *DKG* and *DG*. That happened because my *Lordship* books require a lot of research, and because my other work required me to do a lot of other things, labeled *Urgent*. Those other urgent things continue to beckon me, and I think it humanly impossible that I could finish *DWG*, as originally planned, in two or three years.

So I decided, just in case God doesn't allow me to finish *DWG* according to my original plan, to leave behind the present draft, a more concise version of what I had originally hoped to write. I have in my mind a pretty clear idea of the basic case I'd like to set forth. So I think I can summarize the book now, and add to it later, if God permits. This summary will contain very little documentation: relatively few citations of

historical and current writers. I will be more careful than I usually am to avoid rabbit trails. Here I will simply outline my basic contentions and their basic arguments, so that these will be on the table for discussion, even if all my research is not.

I'm not worthy of being compared to John Calvin, but perhaps this book will grow over the years like the successive editions of Calvin's *Institutes*. Or perhaps I will write an additional book or two, dealing with the history and contemporary discussion of the word of God and Scripture.

On the other hand, maybe I will not expand this project at all. To tell the truth, I rather like this concise version, and I have some worry that it might even be harmed if I add to it a great deal of interaction with historical and contemporary literature. Regular readers of my work know that I am critical of the typical method of modern theologians (including evangelical theologians), who include in their writing a great deal of interaction with other theologians and very little interaction with Scripture itself. This is an inheritance from the academic model of theology, which I have criticized elsewhere.¹ Interaction with the theological literature is useful in a number of ways. But most important by far is what Scripture itself tells us. It has always been my purpose to emphasize the latter, even though more of the former might have gained for my work a greater level of acceptance. Focus on Scripture without the theological environs gives my argument a kind of starkness, a kind of sharpness, that I want it to have. So this concise version of *DWG* may turn out to be the final version, regardless of how many more years God gives me.

And the more I think about it, the more I think this book is my best work ever.

Thanks to many who have shared kind words and constructive criticisms of the other books in this series. To those who have noted that these books are too "self-referential," that I refer too often to other writings of mine, I reply that that is the nature of the Theology of Lordship series. In my view, this series is a single project, setting forth a unified vision of the theology of Scripture. I believe most of my readers understand this, and that I am doing them a service by referring to parallel discussions of issues from volume to volume. This is simply a supplement to the indices, analytical outlines, and tables of contents—a reference tool. I hope this practice doesn't draw too much attention to myself; I don't believe that it does, and I don't intend it to. But in any case, I think these references perform a service to those who are interested in the Lordship project as a whole.

1. See my "Proposal for a New Seminary," available at http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/1978Proposal.htm.

If the “self-referential” comment has to do with my use of the first-person pronoun and my occasional stream-of-consciousness mode, again I will not apologize or change. I have often said that theology is not primarily an academic discipline, observing the impersonal academic conventions. It is rather (as in the NT) a highly personal communication, a testimony of faith. Our God is personal, and the Christian *didache* is also personal. I will never change in that respect. If the theological community has adopted rules that conflict with this vision, then it ought to change them.

Does this personalist approach detract from the God-centeredness of my theology? Readers are invited to make their own judgment about that. But if this approach to theology is scriptural, it can never detract from the God-centeredness of the theology. And Psalm 18 (among many other Scripture passages) shows concretely that a large number of personal references are compatible with God-centeredness and can actually enhance it: “The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer” (v. 2). The psalmist here shows explicitly God’s centrality to his whole life.

A few words about the dedication of this book. Edmund P. Clowney was the first president of Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia. He was a teacher, friend, and mentor to me during my student years at Westminster (1961–64) and until his death in 2005. From 1968 to 1980 we were colleagues at Westminster in Philadelphia, and through most of 1980–2000 at Westminster in California. Westminster in Philadelphia during my student days was a wonderful place in which to study the doctrine of Scripture. Practically every professor made some major contribution to the defense of biblical authority. But Ed Clowney seemed to me to be the best at setting forth the big picture, that Scripture asserts the authority of God’s word on nearly every page, in one way or another, and that the Christian life in its essence is a faithful response to the Word of God. Ed never wrote a major work on this subject, but the present volume seeks to set forth his vision.

Ed and I disagreed on a number of things that were important to both of us: the regulative principle of worship, the appropriateness of contemporary songs and instrumentation in worship, the preeminence of biblical theology in sermon preparation, the “two kingdoms” view of Christ and culture, and the value of Norman Shepherd’s theology. These issues have produced factions in Reformed circles, with one party trying to exclude another from the Reformed community. But the friendship between Ed and me was never disrupted by this kind of division. He respected my Reformed commitment, even when others questioned it, and I treasured his faithfulness, wisdom, and kindness to the end of his life. I seek to honor him here, as well as to emulate his theology of the word of God.

The analytical outline is not a mirror image of the internal structure of DWG's chapters because, generally speaking, those chapters are not divided into precise sections. It is, however, a fair outline. I think it actually adds something to the book, unlike the outlines of the earlier books in the Lordship series, because readers will be able to see developments in the arguments that they might not have thought of simply by reading the chapters. Therefore, although it is not terribly different from previous analytical outlines in the Lordship series, in my judgment it is actually an improvement.

DWG uses *word of God* and *word* (as shorthand for *word of God*) in a variety of ways. When *word of God* or *word* refers to the written, inscripturated Word of God, *word* is capitalized in this book. *Word* is also capitalized when it refers to Christ as the Word incarnate. Otherwise, *word of God* and *word* are lowercased.

I wish to express thanks to the board, administration, and faculty of Reformed Theological Seminary for granting me a study leave for the spring term of 2007, which helped with my preparation to write this book. Thanks again also to P&R Publishing for supporting my work over many years, and especially to John J. Hughes and Karen Magnuson, who edited this volume.

Abbreviations

AGG	<i>Apologetics to the Glory of God</i>
ASV	American Standard Version
CalCon	<i>Calvinist Contact</i>
CRC	Christian Reformed Church
CVT	<i>Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought</i>
CWM	<i>Contemporary Worship Music</i>
DCL	<i>The Doctrine of the Christian Life</i>
DG	<i>The Doctrine of God</i>
DKG	<i>The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God</i>
DWG	<i>The Doctrine of the Word of God</i>
ER	<i>Evangelical Reunion</i>
ESV	English Standard Version
GKN	Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland
Guardian	<i>The Presbyterian Guardian</i>
IRB	<i>International Reformed Bulletin</i>
JETS	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
JPP	<i>Journal of Pastoral Practice</i>
KJV	King James Version
LXX	Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible widely used in the time of Jesus and the apostles
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NEBA	<i>The Nature and Extent of Biblical Authority</i>
NIV	New International Version
NKJV	New King James Version
NLT	New Living Translation
NOG	<i>No Other God</i>
NT	New Testament

OT	Old Testament
RES	Reformed Ecumenical Synod
RESTB	<i>RES Theological Bulletin</i>
SBL	<i>Salvation Belongs to the Lord</i>
WCF	Westminster Confession of Faith
WLC	Westminster Larger Catechism
WSC	Westminster Shorter Catechism
WTJ	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>

PART ONE

ORIENTATION

CHAPTER 1

The Personal-Word Model

The main contention of this volume is that God's speech to man is real speech. It is very much like one person speaking to another. God speaks so that we can understand him and respond appropriately. Appropriate responses are of many kinds: belief, obedience, affection, repentance, laughter, pain, sadness, and so on. God's speech is often propositional: God's conveying information to us. But it is far more than that. It includes all the features, functions, beauty, and richness of language that we see in human communication, and more. So the concept I wish to defend is broader than the "propositional revelation" that we argued so ardently forty years ago, though propositional revelation is part of it. My thesis is that God's word, in all its qualities and aspects, is a personal communication from him to us.

Imagine God speaking to you right now, as realistically as you can imagine, perhaps standing at the foot of your bed at night. He speaks to you like your best friend, your parents, or your spouse. There is no question in your mind as to who he is: he is God. In the Bible, God often spoke to people in this way: to Adam and Eve in the garden; to Noah; to Abraham; to Moses. For some reason, these were all fully persuaded that the speaker was God, even when the speaker told them to do things they didn't understand. Had God asked me to take my son up a mountain to burn him as a sacrifice, as he asked of Abraham in Genesis 22, I would have decided that it wasn't God and could not be God, because God could never command such a thing. But somehow Abraham didn't raise that question. He knew, somehow, that God had spoken to him, and he knew what God expected him to do.

We question Abraham at this point, as did Søren Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling*.¹ But if God is God, if God is who he claims to be, isn't it likely that he is able to persuade Abraham that the speaker is really he? Isn't he able to unambiguously identify himself to Abraham's mind?

Now imagine that when God speaks to you personally, he gives you some information, or commands you to do something. Will you then be inclined to argue with him? Will you criticize what he says? Will you find something inadequate in his knowledge or in the rightness of his commands? I hope not. For that is the path to disaster. When God speaks, our role is to believe, obey, delight, repent, mourn—whatever he wants us to do. Our response should be without reservation, from the heart. Once we understand (and of course we often misunderstand), we must not hesitate. We may at times find occasion to criticize one another's words, but God's words are not the subject of criticism.

Sometimes in the Bible we do hear of "arguments" between God and his conversation partners. Abraham pleaded for the life of his nephew Lot in Sodom (Gen. 18:22–33), and Moses pleaded that God would not destroy Israel (Ex. 33:12–23). But no human being, in such a conversation, ought to question the truth of what God says, God's right to do as he pleases, or the rightness of God's decisions. The very presupposition of Abraham's argument, indeed, is "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" (Gen. 18:25), a rhetorical question that must be answered yes. Abraham's argument with God is a prayer, asking God to make exceptions to the coming judgment he has announced. Abraham persists in that prayer, as all believers should do. But he does not question the truth of God's words to him (Rom. 4:20–21) or the rightness of God's plans.² Sometimes, to be sure, believers in Scripture do find fault with God, as did Job (Job 40:2), but that is sin, and such people need to repent (40:3–5; 42:1–6).

God's personal speech is not an unusual occurrence in Scripture. In fact, it is the main engine propelling the biblical narrative forward. The thing at issue in the biblical story is always the word of God. God speaks to Adam and Eve in the garden to define their fundamental task (Gen. 1:28). All of human history is our response to that word of God. God speaks to Adam again, forbidding him to eat the forbidden fruit (2:17). That word is the issue before the first couple. If they obey, God will continue to bless. If they don't, he will curse. The narrative permits no question whether the

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling: The Sickness unto Death* (1941; repr., Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1954).

2. On the question whether God can change his mind, see *DG*, 559–72. And see *ibid.*, 150, which is also relevant to the question whether God's decrees are in any sense dependent on events in history, that is, how God's foreordination is related to his foreknowledge.

couple knew that it was God who spoke. Nor does it allow the possibility that they did not understand what he was saying. God had given them a personal word, pure and simple. Their responsibility was clear.

This is what we mean when we say that God's word is *authoritative*. The *authority* of God's word varies broadly according to the many functions I have listed. When God communicates information, we are obligated to believe it. When he tells us to do something, we are obligated to obey. When he tells us a parable, we are obligated to place ourselves in the narrative and meditate on the implications of that. When he expresses affection, we are obligated to appreciate and reciprocate. When he gives us a promise, we are obligated to trust. Let's define the *authority* of language as its capacity to create an obligation in the hearer. So the speech of an absolute authority creates absolute obligation. Obligation is not the only content of language, as we have seen. But it is the result of the *authority* of language.

As we know, Adam and Eve disobeyed. Many questions arise here. How did people whom God had declared "very good," along with the rest of creation (Gen. 1:31), disobey his word? The narrative doesn't tell us. Another question is why they would have wanted to disobey God. They knew who God was. They understood the authority of his word and his power to curse or bless. Why would they make a decision that they knew would bring a curse on themselves? The question is complicated a bit by the presence of Satan in the form of a serpent. Satan presumed to interpose a word rivaling God's, a word contradicting God's. But why would Adam and Eve have given Satan any credence at all? The most profound answer, I think, is that Adam and Eve wanted to be their own gods. Impulsively, arrogantly, and certainly irrationally, they exchanged God's truth for a lie (cf. Rom. 1:25). So they brought God's curse upon themselves (Gen. 3:16–19). Clearly, they should have known better. The word of God was clear and true. They should have obeyed it.

Noah, too, heard God's personal speech, telling him to build an ark. Unlike Adam, he obeyed God. He might have thought, like his neighbors, and like Adam, that God couldn't have been right about this. Why build a gigantic boat in a desert? But Noah obeyed God, and God vindicated his faith. Similarly with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, Gideon, David. All these narratives and others begin with God's personal speech, often saying something hard to believe or commanding something hard to do. The course of the narrative depends on the character's response, in faith or unbelief. Hebrews 11 summarizes the faithful ones. Faith, in both Testaments, is hearing the word of God and doing it.

That's the biblical story: a story of God speaking to people personally, and people responding appropriately or inappropriately.

Scripture is plain that this is the very nature of the Christian life: having God's word and doing it. Jesus said, "Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me" (John 14:21). Everything we know about God we know because he has told us, through his personal speech. All our duties to God are from his commands. All the promises of salvation through the grace of Christ are God's promises, from his own mouth. What other source could there possibly be, for a salvation message that so contradicts our own feelings of self-worth, our own ideas of how to earn God's favor?

Now, to be sure, there are questions about where we can find God's personal words today, for he does not normally speak to us now as he did to Abraham. (These are questions of *canon*.) And there are questions about how we can come to understand God's words, given our distance from the culture in which they were given. (These are questions of *hermeneutics*.) I will address these questions in due course. But the answer *cannot* be that God's personal words are unavailable to us, or unintelligible to us. If we say either of those things, then we lose all touch with the biblical gospel. The idea that God communicates with human beings in personal words pervades all of Scripture, and it is central to every doctrine of Scripture. If God has, in fact, not spoken to us personally, then we lose any basis for believing in salvation by grace, in judgment, in Christ's atonement—indeed, for believing in the biblical God at all. Indeed, if God has not spoken to us personally, then everything important in Christianity is human speculation and fantasy.

Yet it should be evident to anyone who has studied the recent history of theology that the mainstream liberal and neoorthodox traditions have in fact denied that such personal words have occurred, even that they can occur. Others have said that although God's personal words may have occurred in the past, they are no longer available to us as personal words because of the problems of hermeneutics and canon. If those theologies are true, all is lost.

The present book is simply an exposition and defense of the biblical personal-word model of divine communication. As such, it will be different from many books on the theology of revelation and Scripture. Of course, this book will differ from the liberal and neoorthodox positions, but it will not spend a great deal of time analyzing those. Nor will it resemble the many recent books from more conservative authors that have the purpose of showing how much we can learn from Bible critics and how the concept of inerrancy needs to be redefined, circumscribed, or eliminated.³ I don't

3. For examples of how I respond to such arguments, see my reviews of recent books by Peter Enns, N. T. Wright, and Andrew McGowan, Appendices J, K, and L in this volume.

doubt that we can learn some things from Bible critics, but that is not my burden here. As for inerrancy, I think it is a perfectly good idea when understood in its dictionary definition and according to the intentions of its original users. But it is only an element of a larger picture. The term *inerrancy* actually says much *less* than we need to say in commending the authority of Scripture. I will argue that Scripture, together with all of God's other communications to us, should be treated as nothing less than God's personal word.

To make that case, I don't think it's necessary to follow the usual theological practice today, setting forth the history of doctrine and the contemporary alternatives and then, in the small amount of space that remains, choosing among the viable options. I have summarized my view of the liberal tradition here in chapters 3–7, and I do hope that in later editions of this book and in other writings I will find time to interact more fully with those writings.⁴ But although we can learn from the history of doctrine and from contemporary theologians, the final answers to our questions must come from the Word of God itself. And I don't think you need to look hard to find those answers. You don't need to engage in abstruse, complicated exegesis. You need only to look at the obvious things and be guided by them, rather than by Enlightenment skepticism. This book will attempt to set forth those obvious teachings and explore some of their implications.

The main difference between this book and other books on the doctrines of revelation and Scripture is that I am trying here, above all else, to be ruthlessly consistent with Scripture's own view of itself. In that regard, I'm interested in not only defending what Scripture says about Scripture, but defending it by means of the Bible's own worldview, its own epistemology,⁵ and its own values.⁶ That there is a circularity here I do not doubt. I am defending the Bible by the Bible. Circularity of a kind is unavoidable when one seeks to defend an ultimate standard of truth, for one's defense must itself be accountable to that standard.⁷ Of course, I will not hesitate to bring extrabiblical considerations to bear on the argument when such considerations are acceptable within a biblical epistemology. But ultimately I trust the Holy Spirit to bring persuasion to the readers of this book. God's communication with human beings, we will see, is supernatural all the way through.

4. For examples of such interaction, see Appendices A, E, F, H, M, and Q in this volume.

5. I have formulated what I think a biblical epistemology looks like in *DKG*.

6. *DCL* focuses on biblical values. *DKG* makes the case that biblical epistemology can be understood as a subdivision of biblical ethics.

7. See *DKG*, 130–33.