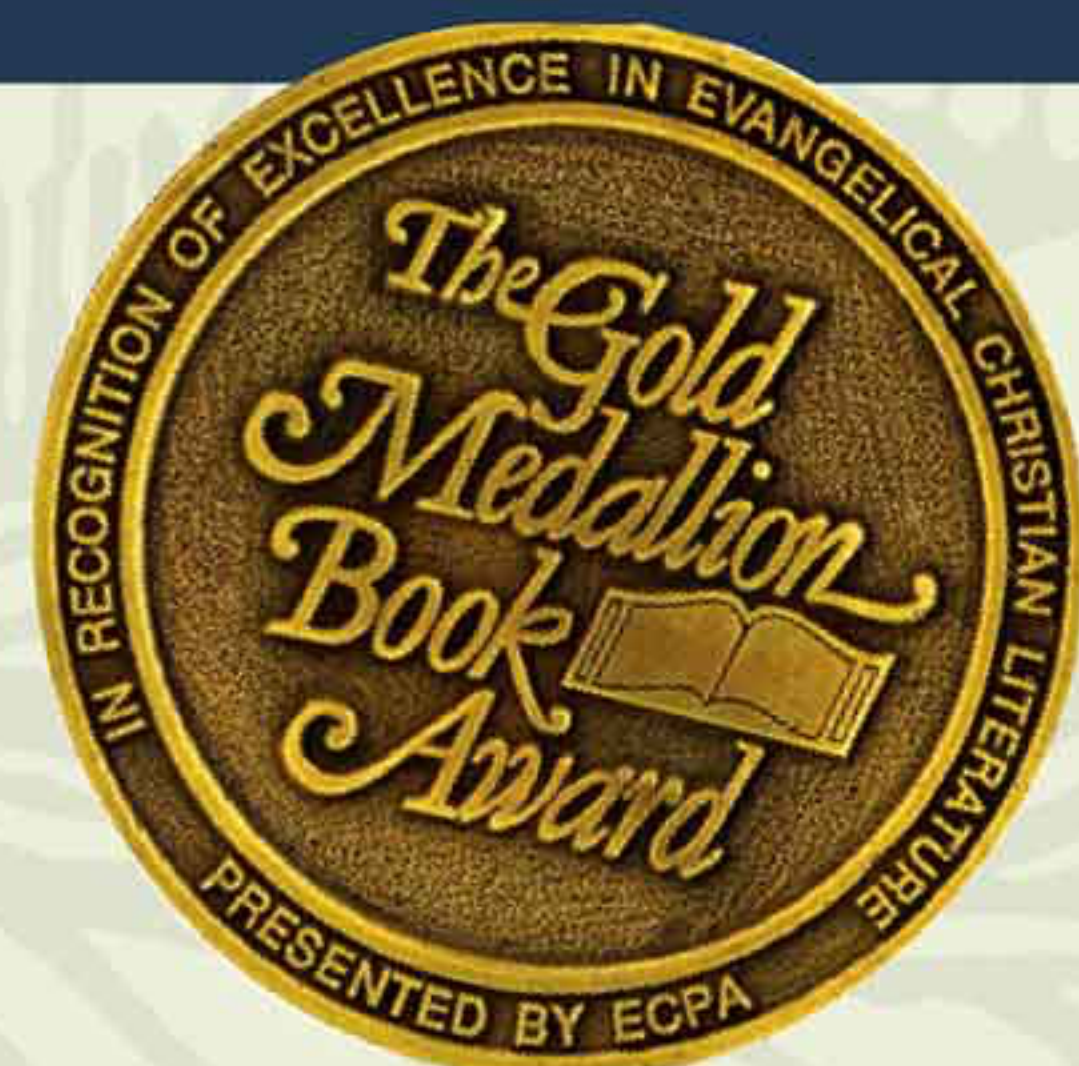


A Theology of Lordship

VOLUME 2



The

DOCTRINE

of

GOD

JOHN M. FRAME

THE
DOCTRINE
OF GOD

A THEOLOGY OF LORDSHIP

A SERIES BY JOHN M. FRAME

The Doctrine of God

The Doctrine of the Christian Life

The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God

The Doctrine of the Word of God

THE
DOCTRINE
OF GOD

JOHN M. FRAME


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To Justin

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,”
declares the LORD.

“As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (Isa. 55:8–9)

For this is what the high and lofty One says—
he who lives forever, whose name is holy:
“I live in a high and holy place,
but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit,
to revive the spirit of the lowly
and to revive the heart of the contrite.” (Isa. 57:15)

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable his judgments,
and his paths beyond tracing out!
“Who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his counselor?”
“Who has ever given to God,
that God should repay him?”
For from him and through him and to him are all things.
To him be the glory forever! Amen. (Rom. 11:33–36)

Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength
and honor and glory and praise! (Rev. 5:12)

Why can't I see God; Is he watching me?
Is he somewhere out in space, or is he here with me?
I am just a child; teach me from his word;
Then I'll go and tell to all the great things I have heard.

Teach me while my heart is tender;
Tell me all that I should know,
And even through the years I will remember,
No matter where I go.*

* "Why Can't I See God?" From *Songs on the Westminster Catechism* by Judy Rogers, used by permission. www.judyrogers.com © Judy Rogers, 1991.

Contents

Analytical Outline	xi
Preface	xxi
Abbreviations of Frequently Cited Titles	xxiii
1. Introduction	1
PART ONE: YAHWEH THE LORD	
2. The Lord	21
3. The Lordship Attributes: Control	36
4. God's Control: Its Efficacy and Universality	47
5. The Lordship Attributes: Authority	80
6. The Lordship Attributes: Covenant Presence	94
7. Transcendence and Immanence	103
PART TWO: SOME PROBLEM AREAS	
8. Human Responsibility and Freedom	119
9. The Problem of Evil	160
PART THREE: A PHILOSOPHY OF LORDSHIP	
10. Ethics	185
11. Epistemology	199
12. Metaphysics	214
PART FOUR: THE ACTS OF THE LORD	
13. Miracle	241
14. Providence	274
15. Creation	289
16. God's Decrees	313

PART FIVE: BIBLICAL DESCRIPTIONS OF GOD

17. Names of God	343
18. Images of God	362
19. God's Attributes	387
20. God's Goodness	402
21. God's Righteousness and Wrath	446
22. God's Knowledge	469
23. God's Power	513
24. Lord of Time	543
25. Lord of Space, Matter, Light, and Breath	576
26. The Self-Contained God	600

PART SIX: THE TRIUNE GOD

27. God, Three in One	619
28. The Three Are God	644
29. Father, Son, and Spirit	688
30. Summary and Conclusion	736

Appendix A: More Triads	743
Appendix B: Mark Karlberg on <i>The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God</i>	751
Appendix C: Mark Karlberg on <i>Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought</i>	759
Appendix D: Review of Benjamin Wirt Farley, <i>The Providence of God</i>	769
Appendix E: Review of Paul Helm, <i>The Providence of God</i>	775
Appendix F: Review of Frederick Sontag and M. Darrol Bryant (eds.), <i>God: The Contemporary Discussion</i>	781
Appendix G: Review of Colin Brown, <i>Miracles and the Critical Mind</i>	790
Appendix H: Review of David Ray Griffin, <i>Evil Revisited</i>	797
Appendix I: Review of Brian G. Armstrong, <i>Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy</i>	801
Bibliography	807
Index of Names	813
Index of Subjects	819
Index of Scripture	837

Analytical Outline

1. Introduction
 - A. The Doctrine of God in History
 - B. A Response to Scholasticism
 - (1) *Sola Scriptura* Versus Philosophical Imperialism and Traditionalism
 - (2) Covenant Lordship and the Central Message of the Bible
 - (3) Engagement with Recent Philosophy and Theology
 - (4) Changes in the Order of Topics to Facilitate Communication
 - C. The Structure of This Volume

PART ONE: YAHWEH THE LORD

2. The Lord
 - A. The Centrality of Lordship
 - B. Yahweh: the Name of a Person
 - C. Yahweh, the Holy One
 - D. Lordship as Covenant Headship
3. The Lordship Attributes: Control
 - A. Recent and Traditional Views of Exodus 3:14
 - B. Passages Expounding the Name Yahweh
 - C. The Covenantal Triad
 - D. Yahweh the Controller
4. God's Control: Its Efficacy and Universality
 - A. The Efficacy of God's Control
 - B. Universality: the Natural World
 - C. Human History
 - D. Individual Human Lives
 - E. Human Decisions
 - F. Sins

- G. Faith and Salvation
- H. Summary Passages
- 5. The Lordship Attributes: Authority
 - A. The Concept of Divine Authority
 - B. Authority as an Aspect of Lordship
 - C. Absolute Authority
 - D. Divine Authority in the History of Redemption
 - E. The Universality of Divine Authority
- 6. The Lordship Attributes: Covenant Presence
 - A. Presence in Time
 - B. Presence in Place
 - C. Presence in Blessing and Judgment
 - D. The Lord's Presence in All Creation
- 7. Transcendence and Immanence
 - A. Transcendence and Immanence in Scripture
 - B. Transcendence and Immanence in Theology
 - C. A Religious Antithesis

PART TWO: SOME PROBLEM AREAS

- 8. Human Responsibility and Freedom
 - A. Responsibility as Accountability
 - B. Responsibility as Liability
 - C. Responsibility and Ability
 - D. Excursus on Ability
 - E. Freedom
 - F. A Critique of Libertarianism
 - G. Freedom in the Westminster Confession
 - H. Creaturely Otherness, Integrity, and Significance
 - I. Divine and Human Causality
 - J. Models of Divine and Human Agency
- 9. The Problem of Evil
 - A. The Nature of Evil
 - B. Some Good Things about Evil
 - C. Evil and God's Agency

PART THREE: A PHILOSOPHY OF LORDSHIP

10. Ethics

- A. Existential Ethics
- B. Teleological Ethics
- C. Deontological Ethics
- D. Mixed Approaches
- E. Christian Ethics
- F. Some Applications

11. Epistemology

- A. Incomprehensibility and Knowability
- B. Analogy
- C. Lordship and Knowledge

12. Metaphysics

- A. The Great Chain of Being
- B. The Scholastic Philosophy of Being
- C. Simplicity
- D. Necessity and Freedom
- E. Metaphysical Perspectives

PART FOUR: THE ACTS OF THE LORD

13. Miracle

- A. Structural Overview of Parts Four through Six
- B. Defining Miracle
- C. Natural Law
- D. Immediacy
- E. Attesting God's Messengers
- F. Some Other Reformed Views of Miracle
- G. Miracles as Demonstrations of God's Covenant Lordship
- H. Miracle and Providence
- I. Have Miracles Ceased?
- J. Possibility and Probability
- K. Evidence for Miracle
- L. Miracle as Evidence for Christianity

14. Providence

- A. Government
- B. Preservation
- C. Revelation
- D. Concurrence

15. Creation

- A. Defining Creation
- B. Creation and Covenant Lordship
- C. Creation and Redemption
- D. Creation out of Nothing
- E. The Six Days
- F. The Age of the Earth
- G. Evolution

16. God's Decrees

- A. God's Plan
- B. The Decrees and God's Lordship
- C. Historical Election
- D. Eternal Election
- E. Reprobation
- F. The Order of the Decrees

PART FIVE: BIBLICAL DESCRIPTIONS OF GOD

17. Names of God

- A. Naming and Describing
- B. God's Name and God Himself
- C. Name and Lordship
 - (1) Control
 - (2) Authority
 - (3) Presence
- D. Some Names of God
 - (1) *Yahweh*
 - (2) *'Adon*
 - (3) *'Elohim*
 - (4) *'El*
 - (5) *'El shadday*
 - (6) Compound Names

18. Images of God

- A. The Theological Possibility of Images
- B. Anthropomorphisms
- C. Some Biblical Images of God
- D. God and Gender
 - (1) What Would a Female God Be Like?
 - (2) Feminine Images of God in Scripture
 - (3) The Theological Importance of Masculine Imagery

19. God's Attributes

- A. Review of the Divine Attributes
- B. God's Attributes and His Lordship
- C. Does God Have a Fundamental Attribute?
- D. Classifying God's Attributes
- E. Distinctions within Attribute Groups
- F. Starting with Goodness

20. God's Goodness

- A. Goodness as Perfection
- B. The Euthyphro Problem
- C. Goodness as Benevolence
- D. Objects of God's Goodness
- E. God's Goodness and His Lordship
- F. God's Love
- G. Objects of God's Love
 - (1) God's Self-Love
 - (2) God's Universal Love
 - (3) God's Saving Love
- H. God's Love and His Lordship
- I. God's Grace
- J. Common Grace and God's Patience
 - (1) God Restrains Sin
 - (2) God Restrains His Wrath
 - (3) God Gives Temporal Blessings to All
 - (4) Unregenerate People Do Good
 - (5) Unregenerate People Know Truth

- (6) Unregenerate People Experience Some Blessings of the Holy Spirit
 - K. God's Covenant Love
 - L. God's Compassion
 - M. Other Forms of God's Goodness
- 21. God's Righteousness and Wrath
 - A. God's Righteous Standards
 - B. God's Righteous Deeds
 - C. God's Jealousy
 - D. God's Hatred
 - E. God's Wrath
- 22. God's Knowledge
 - A. God's Speech
 - B. God's Truth
 - C. God's Knowledge
 - D. God's Knowledge and His Lordship
 - E. Omniscience
 - F. God's Knowledge of the Future
 - (1) God's Knowledge of the Future in General
 - (2) God's Foreknowledge of Free Human Decisions and Actions
 - (3) Passages Alleged to Teach Divine Ignorance
 - G. God's Knowledge of Possibilities
 - H. God's Knowledge of Contingencies: "Middle Knowledge"
 - I. God's Wisdom
 - J. God's Mind
- 23. God's Power
 - A. God's Omnipotence
 - (1) God Can Do Anything He Pleases
 - (2) Nothing Is Too Hard for God
 - B. What God Cannot Do
 - C. Definitions of Omnipotence
 - D. Absolute and Ordinate Power
 - E. Omnipotence and Redemption
 - F. Power and Weakness

- G. God's Will
 - H. Antecedent and Consequent Wills
 - I. Decretive and Preceptive Wills
 - J. Does God Desire the Salvation of All?
 - K. Which Is the Real Will of God?
 - L. A Third Will?
24. Lord of Time
- A. God's Infinity
 - B. God's Eternity
 - C. Arguments against Divine Atemporality
 - D. Arguments for Divine Atemporality
 - E. Scripture on God and Time
 - F. God's Temporal Omnipresence
 - G. God's Unchangeability
 - (1) A God Who Relents
 - (2) How Is God Unchanging?
 - (3) Unchangeability and Temporal Omnipresence
 - H. Some Modern Views
 - (1) Process Theology
 - (2) Futurism
25. Lord of Space, Matter, Light, and Breath
- A. God's Immensity
 - (1) Explicit Scripture Texts
 - (2) An Ethical Focus
 - (3) Biblical Personalism
 - (4) Lordship and Space
 - B. God's Spatial Omnipresence
 - C. God's Incorporeality
 - D. Theophany and Incarnation
 - E. God's Invisibility
 - F. God's Glory
 - (1) The Glory-Theophany
 - (2) Glory as God's Presence
 - (3) God's Glory in Creation

- (4) Glory and the Trinity
- G. God's Spirituality
 - (1) Power
 - (2) Authority
 - (3) Presence in Blessing and Judgment
 - (4) The Spirit in Redemptive History
- 26. The Self-Contained God
 - A. God's Aseity
 - B. Does God Have Feelings?
 - C. Can God Suffer?
- PART SIX: THE TRIUNE GOD
- 27. God, Three in One
 - A. Trinitarian Basics
 - B. God Is One
 - C. God and the Gods
 - D. Contemporary Critiques of Monotheism
 - E. God Is Three
 - (1) Plurals
 - (2) Hypostatizations
 - (3) Divine Persons in the Old Testament
 - (4) Triads in the Old Testament
 - (5) Old Testament Triads of Divine Beings
 - (6) The Divine Persons of the New Testament
- 28. The Three Are God
 - A. Functional and Ontological Christologies
 - B. Taking Jesus' Deity for Granted
 - C. Christ, the Covenant Lord
 - D. Christ, the Son of God
 - E. Jesus, the Christ
 - F. Jesus Christ Is God
 - (1) John 1:1
 - (2) John 1:18
 - (3) John 20:28
 - (4) Acts 20:28

- (5) Romans 9:5
 - (6) 1 Timothy 3:15–16
 - (7) 2 Thessalonians 1:12; Titus 2:13; 2 Peter 1:1
 - (8) Hebrews 1:8
 - (9) 1 John 5:20
 - (10) Philippians 2:6
 - (11) Colossians 2:9
 - (12) Epilogue
 - G. Other Titles of Christ
 - H. Divine Attributes of Jesus
 - I. Divine Acts of Jesus
 - J. Jesus, Object of Faith and Worship
 - K. Alleged Problem Passages
 - (1) Proverbs 8:22
 - (2) Mark 10:18
 - (3) John 14:28; 1 Corinthians 11:3; 15:28
 - (4) John 17:3
 - (5) 1 Corinthians 8:6
 - (6) Colossians 1:15–18
 - L. The Deity of the Holy Spirit
29. Father, Son, and Spirit
- A. The Distinctness of the Persons
 - B. The Distinct Personality of the Spirit
 - C. *Circumincessio*
 - D. Mutual Glorification
 - E. Substance and Persons
 - F. The Ontological and Economic Trinities
 - G. Eternal Generation
 - H. Eternal Procession
 - I. *Filioque*
 - J. Subordination
 - K. Trinitarian Models
 - L. Trinitarian Analogies
 - M. Philosophical Analogies
 - N. Trinity and the Lordship of God

30. Summary and Conclusion

A. Does God Exist?

Appendix A: More Triads

Appendix B: Mark Karlberg on *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*

Appendix C: Mark Karlberg on *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought*

Appendix D: Review of Benjamin Wirt Farley, *The Providence of God*

Appendix E: Review of Paul Helm, *The Providence of God*

Appendix F: Review of Frederick Sontag and M. Darrol Bryant (eds.), *God: The Contemporary Discussion*

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Preface

I am now returning to my Theology of Lordship series, fifteen years after the publication of its first installment, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*.¹ First, let me thank all of you who encouraged me to continue, despite many interruptions! I'm sorry to have kept you waiting so long, but I do believe that in God's providence these intervening years have helped me to make this a better book than it otherwise would have been.

I have spent these years researching and focusing my thoughts, as well as doing other writing that has helped me to put the doctrine of God into a broader perspective. My *Medical Ethics*² and my *Perspectives on the Word of God*³ were originally series of lectures in which I was able to explain and develop my three-perspective approach in application to specific issues and with a broader range of readers in mind.

My *Evangelical Reunion*⁴ and my two books on worship, *Worship in Spirit and Truth*⁵ and *Contemporary Worship Music: A Biblical Defense*,⁶ were responses to church controversies—responses that, in these situations, I felt really couldn't wait. But though my studies of worship were forced on me by circumstances, I must regard those circumstances as providential. Nothing has been more helpful to my understanding of God's nature and work than my study of what it means to worship him according to Scripture.

And, of course, 1995 was the one hundredth anniversary of Cornelius Van Til's birth. I had long planned to pay homage to him in that year, and my rereading of his work yielded my *Apologetics to the Glory of God*⁷ and *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought*.⁸ I have always seen the Theology of Lordship series as in large part an attempt to apply Van Til's insights, and so I am very glad that I was able to give him some thorough attention before writing the present volume.

1. Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 1987. Beginning in chapter 1, I shall refer to my books as shown in the list of abbreviations that follows this preface.

2. Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 1988.

3. Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 1999; originally published by P&R Publishing, 1990.

4. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991. Now out of print.

5. Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 1996.

6. Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 1997.

7. Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 1994.

8. Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 1995.

But I'm very happy to be back on track now with this series, and I hope that, after this book, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* and *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* will follow in fairly rapid succession—well, with perhaps a few minor interruptions. *The Doctrine of God* is the second volume to appear, but the third in the series as I envision it. The completed series will be on the doctrines of (1) the Word of God, (2) the knowledge of God, (3) God, and (4) the Christian life. The principle of this organization is that we meet God in his Word, a meeting that gives us knowledge, which enables us to describe him as God, which enables us to live for him. Of course, in my view this is not a rigid, temporal sequence. Each of these presupposes and enriches the other three, and each can be described from the perspective of the others. Careful readers will notice that each of these books discusses the subjects of the other three in summary fashion, so that the books differ more in emphasis and perspective than in sharply distinguishable subject matter. So the series itself has a perspectival structure, though each book can, I think, be understood by someone who hasn't read the others.

I envision these books as seminary-level texts that will be helpful to pastors and also to lay Christians who have done some college-level study.

Again, I want to thank all of those who have helped me to think through these matters, including my negative critics. As I approach this particular subject, I feel especially indebted to my teachers and colleagues, living and departed, who have taught the doctrine of God: Cornelius Van Til, John Murray, Edwin H. Palmer, D. Clair Davis, Norman Shepherd, Vern S. Poythress, and Sinclair Ferguson. Thanks also to Doug Swagerty, who produced an excellent edition of my lecture notes, a crucial step in getting my thoughts into some meaningful order; Carla Meberg, who helped me with proofreading on a volunteer basis; Steve Hays, Jim Jordan, and Vern Poythress, who sent me their usual thorough and insightful reviews of the book; the faculty and trustees of Westminster Theological Seminary in California, for giving me a leave of absence to complete the book; my students in the *Doctrine of God and Man* course at Westminster, who studied and discussed my manuscript, making many useful suggestions; the people at Reformed Theological Seminary, who welcomed me to my new position and encouraged me much through a difficult time in my life. Thanks also to James W. Scott, who edited this volume, and to P&R Publishing for their great patience with me.

Abbreviations of Frequently Cited Titles

I will refer to classical sources merely by title (or abbreviation). These can be found in a variety of editions, some of which I have listed in the bibliography.

AGG	John M. Frame, <i>Apologetics to the Glory of God</i> (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 1994)
ChD	Karl Barth, <i>Church Dogmatics</i> (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1936–60)
CVT	John M. Frame, <i>Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought</i> (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 1995)
DBI	Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, <i>Dictionary of Biblical Imagery</i> (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998)
DG	Herman Bavinck, <i>The Doctrine of God</i> (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1951)
DKG	John M. Frame, <i>The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God</i> (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 1987)
Institutes	John Calvin, <i>Institutes of the Christian Religion</i> , ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, The Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960)
JETS	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
RD	Heinrich Heppe, <i>Reformed Dogmatics</i> (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1950, 1978)
SCG	Thomas Aquinas, <i>Summa contra gentiles</i>
ST	Thomas Aquinas, <i>Summa theologiae</i>
WCF	Westminster Confession of Faith
WLC	Westminster Larger Catechism
WSC	Westminster Shorter Catechism
WTJ	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

There is nothing more important than knowing God. Consider these Scripture passages:

“Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom
or the strong man boast of his strength
or the rich man boast of his riches,
but let him who boasts boast about this:
that he understands and knows me,
that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness,
justice and righteousness on earth,
for in these I delight,”

declares the LORD. (Jer. 9:23–24)

Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God,
and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. (John 17:3)

But we live in an age in which the knowledge of God is rare. Many speak glibly about their belief in some god or other. But most would not even claim to know the true God, the God of the Bible. We know of so many people, of whom the psalmist’s words are true:

In his pride the wicked does not seek him;
in all his thoughts there is no room for God. (Ps. 10:4; cf. Rom. 3:11)

A large percentage of people today would say that they believe in God, but they rarely give him a thought, and they routinely make their decisions as

if he didn't exist. So "the fool says in his *heart*, 'There is no God'" (Ps. 14:1), whatever else he may say with his lips. Modern culture becomes more and more secular, pressing even to remove expressions of Christian faith from the public square. Abortion becomes a constitutional right. Criticisms of naturalistic evolution are excluded from public discussion because they are "religious."¹ Opinion makers and the mass media regard as hopelessly outdated the views that sex belongs only within marriage, that homosexuality is wicked, and that marriage is for life.

Alongside this idolatry of the secular, there are elements of modern society that are becoming more open to various old and new spiritualities, to views and practices dismissed by traditional Christianity as superstitions: crystals, occult healing, channeling, and mysticisms of various sorts.² The irony is that while society becomes more tolerant of these things, it becomes less tolerant of biblical Christianity. Although the opinion makers tell us that there are "many paths to God," they exclude the Christian path because it claims to be exclusive. The interesting fact is that both those who idolize secularity and those who promote alternative spiritualities agree in rejecting the God of Scripture. Only he is of sufficient weight for them to recognize as their enemy. So they are eager to shut him out of the cultural dialogue, to replace him with almost any alternative.

This cultural drift often captivates Christians as well. David Wells speaks vividly of the "weightlessness of God" in many churches today.³ Churches and individual Christians devoted to the service of God often govern their lives by the standards of modern secular culture, rather than by the Word of God. They hear and speak about God, often with enthusiasm, but he makes little real difference to them. But how can it be that the Lord of heaven and earth makes no difference?

The doctrine of God, therefore, is not only important for its own sake, as Scripture teaches us, but also particularly important in our own time, as people routinely neglect its vast implications. Our message to the world must emphasize that God is real, and that he will not be trifled with. He

1. See especially Phillip Johnson, *Reason in the Balance* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995) for a critique of this compartmentalization.

2. See the books of Peter Jones, *The Gnostic Empire Strikes Back* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 1992), and *Spirit Wars* (Escondido, Calif.: Main Entry Editions, 1997).

3. David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 88–117. I have expressed some differences with Wells's critique of modern evangelicals in my *Contemporary Worship Music: A Biblical Defense* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 1997), 175–201, a discussion also published in *WTJ* 59 (1997): 269–318, with responses by Wells and Richard Muller, and a further response from me. But I have profited greatly from his observations.

is the almighty, majestic Lord of heaven and earth, and he demands our most passionate love and obedience.

THE DOCTRINE OF GOD IN HISTORY

Theology helps us to formulate that message, applying the biblical teaching about God to us and to our time.⁴ The doctrine of God is one of the traditional “loci” of systematic theology, such as the doctrine of Scripture, the doctrine of man, the doctrine of Christ, and so on.

However, the doctrine of God is different from other loci in significant respects. For one thing, the church has reflected on the doctrine of God largely in dialogue with Greek philosophy and ancient Gnosticism. Early Christian theologians did disagree with the Greeks on significant points, and they were strong opponents of Gnosticism. Occasionally they agreed with some Greek philosophers, but when they did, they usually cited biblical reasons for doing so. It is wrong, therefore, to find in these early theologians a wholesale capitulation to non-Christian thought. Nevertheless, there were some compromises, as we shall see.

And, more obviously, this philosophical discussion had a profound effect on the vocabulary and style of Christian teaching concerning God. Terms like *being*, *substance*, *attribute*, *accident*, *essence*, *necessity*, and *intellect* came to dominate the Christian discussions of God, even though they are absent from Scripture. It isn't wrong to use extrabiblical language to formulate theology. The very nature of theology is to take the language of Scripture and put it into other language, so that we can better understand the Bible and apply it to issues not explicitly mentioned there. But the rather pervasive use of Greek philosophical language had significant effects on the substantive content of theology, and it impeded the church's understanding and use of the actual ways in which the Bible speaks of God.

The Protestant Reformers purged much of the philosophical language from the doctrine of salvation. Pre-Reformation theologians and post-Reformation Roman Catholics tended to see grace almost as a material substance that flowed from God through the church's sacraments to the people. The Reformers saw it, rather, in highly personal terms. In Protestantism, grace is God's personal attitude of favor to those who deserve his wrath, received not by the sacraments *ex opere operato*, but by faith (personal trust). Luther's rediscovery of the gospel (salvation by grace alone, through faith

4. For the concept of theology as application, see *DKG*, 81–85.

alone, in Christ alone) led to a drastic restructuring of the doctrines of sin and salvation.

But the Reformers did not revise the doctrine of God nearly as drastically as they revised the doctrine of salvation.⁵ Luther and Calvin themselves said relatively little about God's nature or attributes or the Trinity. Rather, they basically accepted the formulations of their medieval predecessors. The great emphasis of their work was not on "theology proper" (the doctrine of God), but on God's saving grace in Christ.

It is interesting in this connection to compare the *Summa contra gentiles* of Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) with John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Aquinas's *Summa* is written in four "books," dealing with God, creation, providence, and salvation. Present-day theologians usually treat creation and providence under the general category of the doctrine of God. On this understanding, the *Summa* gives three-fourths of its attention (actually more, in terms of pages) to the doctrine of God, and only one-fourth to the rest of the loci, comprising what we consider to be the heart of the gospel. And, in fact, Aquinas discusses the Trinity in book 4, so that much of that book, also, deals with the doctrine of God.⁶

Aquinas's treatment of the doctrine of God is greatly influenced by the Greek philosopher Aristotle and by pseudo-Dionysius, a virtual Neoplatonist. This philosophical emphasis, together with a method of making very fine distinctions, is what defines the term *scholastic* as it is applied to many medieval theologians.

Calvin's *Institutes* is also divided into four books, but very differently. They are entitled "The Knowledge of God the Creator," "The Knowledge of God the Redeemer in Christ . . .," "The Way in Which We Receive the Grace of Christ . . .," and "The External Means or Aids by Which God Invites Us. . . ." Of these four parts, only the first focuses on the subjects normally associated with the doctrine of God. That first part, however, deals with many other things as well. Chapters 1–9 deal with our knowledge of God through creation and Scripture. Chapters 15–18 discuss the creation of man in God's image. Only chapters 10–14 deal with the traditional subjects of theology proper. And in those chapters the main emphasis is on distinguishing the true God from the false. Chapter 13 deals with the Trinity. Calvin discusses election in book 3,

5. Otto Weber says, "Since the Reformation showed little interest in the traditional doctrine of God, it survived the fiery ordeal of the Reformation's reworking of all tradition far more unscathed than was really good." See his *Foundations of Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 1:397.

6. Aquinas's *Summa theologiae* has a greater emphasis on grace than his *Summa contra gentiles*, as might be expected from its purpose. But the doctrine of God receives a far greater emphasis there, too (covering perhaps half the treatise), than in most Protestant theologies.

in the context of salvation, rather than in a general survey of God's decrees or actions. The *Institutes* contains no survey of divine attributes, no discussion of such matters as the relation of God's essence to his existence, no elaborate proofs for God's existence. The subject of proof comes up briefly in chapter 8, where Calvin mentions many evidences internal to Scripture, but presents no philosophical arguments for God's existence.

There is, therefore, a huge difference between Aquinas and Calvin in how they handle the doctrine of God. Calvin's treatment is quite minimal, compared to the emphasis of almost any pre-Reformation theologian. And Calvin's *Institutes* shows virtually no overt dependence on philosophy, which is pervasive in Aquinas.

Calvin's interest was not in developing an academically respectable system of thought, but "to show the applicability of the great doctrines to everyday life."⁷

Calvin's successors, such as Beza and Turretin, did take a great interest in the doctrine of God. But in their treatments there is very little that is distinctively Reformed. For the most part, the post-Reformation theologians followed, in this particular locus, the medieval models of Aquinas and others. Their doctrine of God, like that of Aquinas, is quite Aristotelian and much inclined to multiply distinctions. For this reason, they are often called "Protestant scholastics."

Since the eighteenth century, however, most Protestant theologians have been critical of both medieval and post-Reformation scholasticism. It has been argued that scholasticism was a kind of nitpicking venture, unnecessarily focusing on minutiae. Furthermore, it has been characterized as speculative and philosophical, rather than biblical. Finally, its teaching has been said to be largely irrelevant to the practical Christian life. My own judgment is that these criticisms are vastly overstated, but there is at least some truth in each of them.

What were the alternatives to scholasticism? Part of the appeal of theological liberalism, from the late seventeenth century to the present, has been its claim to offer alternatives to the scholastic approach. The liberal solution was to base theology on human experience, feelings, history, or ethics, rather than upon Scripture. This approach did appear to end the focus on minutiae, although readers of books like Schleiermacher's *The Christian Faith*⁸ will wonder if the liberal effort didn't merely substitute one

7. Christopher B. Kaiser, *The Doctrine of God: A Historical Survey* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1982), 99. Theology as application! Kaiser also points out that the subtitle of Calvin's *Institutes* in the first edition was *summa pietatis*, an interesting contrast to Aquinas's *ST* and *SCG*.

8. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1956).

set of minutiae for another. Liberalism did not in fact break the bond between theology and secular philosophy. Rather, it was far more bound to secular philosophy than was scholasticism. It did not make theology more practical, either. Its reduction of Christian truth to mere scholarly opinion actually made its claims quite irrelevant to those who were seeking the knowledge of God. Say what we may, there is a vast gulf between mere scholarly opinion and the knowledge of the living God.

Kierkegaard, Barth, and others sought to free Christian theology from any sort of philosophical system, although they actually substituted one philosophical view for another, with no increase in relevance. Existential, liberation, and process theologians accepted the assistance of philosophy—relying not on Plato or Aristotle, but rather on Heidegger, Marx, and Whitehead, respectively. And, unlike the scholastics, they arrived at views of God drastically different from the teachings of Scripture. Denying the sovereign God of the Bible is too large a price to pay to escape the relatively minor problems of scholasticism.

Such denials of God's sovereignty have even appeared in evangelical circles. One is the recent movement toward an "open view of God."⁹ According to this view, God is temporal and lacks exhaustive knowledge of the future, being unsure of the free choices of human beings.

Orthodox Protestants¹⁰ have also tried to escape from scholasticism in various ways. Pietists, Anabaptists, and later charismatics placed more emphasis on the inner life and less on the intellect. Some American fundamentalists tried to reduce the doctrines worthy of serious defense to a small number.

In Reformed circles, there have been various antischolastic strategies. Some have thought it important to vary the order of topics—for example, to deal with election, as Calvin did, under soteriology, rather than under theology proper.¹¹ Although varying the order of topics may occasionally have value in bringing out fresh perspectives and neglected relationships between doctrines, such modifications cannot make a great deal of differ-

9. For example, see Clark Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994); Richard Rice, *God's Foreknowledge and Man's Free Will* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1985); John Sanders, *The God Who Risks* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998). I criticize this position in my *No Other God* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2001) and elsewhere in this present volume.

10. I define an "orthodox" Protestant as one who accepts the supreme authority of Scripture and who accepts one or more of the classic Protestant confessions as biblically sound. In my view, the deviations of the open theists from these standards exclude them from Christian orthodoxy.

11. This was one of the disputes between Moise Amyraut (1596–1664) and the more "scholastic" successors of Calvin. See Brian Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), and my review in *WTJ* 34 (1972): 186–92, published as appendix I in this volume.

ence in the problems associated with scholasticism. If a doctrine of election is scholastic in the worst sense, it won't help matters to move it, otherwise unchanged, from one locus to another.

It is important to see election, as Calvin did, as the fount of our salvation. But it is also important to see it, as Calvin also did, as an aspect of God's eternal plan. Moving election to the locus of soteriology makes it easier to express the former aspect of its meaning, but then one must go a bit out of one's way to express the latter aspect. This is why locus shifting is usually not very helpful. If it be said that this kind of approach is needed to reproduce the emphasis of Scripture, I would reply that the work of theology is not to reproduce the emphasis of Scripture (to do that precisely would require the theologian merely to quote the Bible from Genesis to Revelation), but to apply Scripture to the needs of people.¹² Usually, such a pastoral form of theology requires us to maintain something close to the balance of doctrinal emphases in Scripture. But sometimes it involves giving attention to matters that are not heavily emphasized in Scripture, but which have taken on particular importance for people today. Furthermore, Scripture is not arranged in loci at all, but relates doctrines to one other in a multitude of ways. Thus, it is often hard to determine from Scripture under which locus a particular doctrine belongs.

Herman Dooyeweerd thought that the antidote to scholasticism was to abandon Greek philosophy and to replace it with a specifically Christian philosophy,¹³ namely his own, which would then legitimately determine the scope, and, to some extent, the subject matter, of theology. But others have found in Dooyeweerd's approach a philosophical imperialism without a clear biblical warrant for its claims,¹⁴ and therefore without any compelling reason to be accepted as the philosophy of Christianity.¹⁵

Others have thought that the methods of systematic theology must be controlled by the methods of "biblical theology" or "redemptive history."¹⁶

12. See *DKG*, 81–85.

13. Herman Dooyeweerd, *In the Twilight of Western Thought* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1960), esp. pp. 113–72.

14. E.g., John Frame, *The Amsterdam Philosophy: A Preliminary Critique* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Harmony Press, n.d.). Also see my *CVT*, 371–86.

15. For an attempt to formulate Reformed theology in accord with Dooyeweerd's general philosophical outlook, see Gordon J. Spykman, *Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

16. See, for example, Richard B. Gaffin, "Contemporary Hermeneutics," *WTJ* 31 (1969): 129–44; id., "Geerhardus Vos and the Interpretation of Paul," in *Jerusalem and Athens*, ed. E. R. Geehan (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), 228–37; id., "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," in *The New Testament Student and Theology*, ed. John H. Skilton (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976), 32–50.

On this view, theology should emphasize the narrative of Scripture, as it follows a divinely ordained path from Creation to Cross to consummation. I agree that systematic theology should be more aware of the history of redemption, and I will seek to do that in this book by emphasizing the covenant lordship of God. However, we should not allow this emphasis to eclipse other aspects of biblical truth, such as God's eternal (and therefore suprahistorical) nature, his law, his wisdom, and his involvement in the believer's subjectivity.¹⁷ I support a greater influence of biblical theology upon systematics, but to say that biblical theology (as opposed to other theological methods) should "control" systematics is an overstatement. Systematics should be controlled by everything in God's word.

Still others have sought to overcome scholasticism by adopting various "controlling motifs," such as the feeling of absolute dependence (Schleiermacher), the fatherhood of God (Harnack), the Word of God (Barth), the divine-human personal encounter (Brunner), existential self-understanding (Bultmann), the new Being (Tillich), the language event (Ebeling), holy history (Cullmann), theological imagination (Kaufman), hope (Moltmann), liberation (Gutierrez and many others), the experience of women in a patriarchal setting (Elizabeth Johnson and other feminists), history (Pannenberg), community (Grenz), and the openness of God (Pinnock). These motifs form the central concepts by which the theologian expounds (and in some cases rejects!) the teaching of Scripture as he sees it. Often, theologians advertise these motifs as the central emphases of Scripture, and they claim that if we do theology according to a particular motif, we will thereby follow the emphasis of Scripture and escape the speculation and irrelevance of scholasticism.

I have no objection to theologians writing books on divine fatherhood, the Word of God, or the other topics noted above. We can usefully view the whole Bible from each of these (and other) points of view. But I do object when these are pitted against one another, or when a theologian claims (explicitly or implicitly) that his is the only way to formulate biblical doctrine. And of course I protest vehemently when the motif becomes a filter for rejecting portions of Scripture itself (e.g., 1 Tim. 2:9–15, with its "patriarchalism"). As for the attempt to reproduce the emphasis of Scripture through these motifs, I am as skeptical here as I was with the earlier forms of antischolasticism.

Cornelius Van Til was also an opponent of scholasticism, particularly of its

17. For more on these issues, see *DKG*, 207–12. Here too, as with the question of locus shifting, the issue of maintaining "the emphasis of Scripture" arises. I would reply to that here as I did above.

dependence upon Greek philosophy.¹⁸ He never defined his alternative to scholasticism in any summary way, but it was essentially a renewed emphasis on *sola Scriptura*. He insisted that we recognize the profound antithesis between Scripture and unbelieving philosophy, and that we accept the teachings of Scripture as our presupposition in theology, as in all other areas of thought and life. Scripture alone has the final say; all our thought should be brought captive to the self-attesting Christ of Scripture (cf. 2 Cor. 10:5).

Van Til was also convinced in his heart and soul that the confessions of the Reformed faith were thoroughly in accord with Scripture, though he did take exception to parts of the Westminster Confession's teaching on the Sabbath. So, in practice, his presupposition was not only Scripture by itself, but also the Reformed faith as the definitive exposition of Scripture. I too am enthusiastic about Reformed theology, but I am convinced that we need to draw a sharper distinction between the Reformed confessions and the Scriptures than Van Til did, for the sake of the very principle (*sola Scriptura*) that was so important to him. According to the Reformed faith itself, we must be able to reform all the traditions of the church (including the confessions) according to the Word of God.¹⁹

A RESPONSE TO SCHOLASTICISM

SOLA SCRIPTURA VERSUS PHILOSOPHICAL IMPERIALISM AND TRADITIONALISM

As I have indicated, my own response to scholasticism is less critical than the responses of those noted above. In my view, the Protestant scholastics differed from Luther and Calvin mainly in that the former were seeking to develop academically rigorous theological systems, while Luther and Calvin saw the main task of theology as pastoral and polemical. Attempting to understand biblical doctrines thoroughly and systematically is a worthy project, and I don't object at all to the post-Reformation effort to make fine distinctions and explore minutiae. These discussions are not for everybody, but

18. See CVT, 241–68, 339–52.

19. See my "In Defense of Something Close to Biblicism," *WTJ* 59 (1997): 269–318, also published as appendix 2 in my *Contemporary Worship Music*. I have developed my critique of traditionalism also in a debate with D. G. Hart, *The Regulative Principle of Worship: Scripture, Tradition, and Culture* (Glenside, Pa.: Westminster Campus Bookstore, 1998). The WCF itself says, "All synods or councils, since the Apostles' times, whether general or particular, may err; and many have erred. Therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith, or practice; but to be used as a help in both" (31.4).

they are helpful in some situations. Nevertheless, it is true that the Protestant scholastics were generally too uncritical of the Greek philosophers and of the Medieval systems. Therefore, particularly on the subject of the doctrine of God, their thought was not always firmly grounded in Scripture. Furthermore, their theological writings, though intellectually impressive, do not always speak to the practical concerns of contemporary believers.

So my resolve in this book is first of all to maintain *sola Scriptura*. I seek here above all to present what Scripture says about God, applying that teaching, of course, to the questions of our time. I am not trying to write both a biblical study and a history of doctrine. The focus will always be on Scripture, though of course I will often refer to older and contemporary sources in formulating the relevant questions and in exploring possible answers. The history of doctrine is important and valuable, but, granted *sola Scriptura*, it is not in itself a sufficient or independent source of truth.

As I have indicated in my writings on biblicism and tradition,²⁰ there is a tendency among some leading evangelical thinkers today to base theological judgments on tradition, rather than directly on Scripture. I don't deny the value of traditions, confessions, or historical study. But to make them ultimately normative is to violate the sufficiency of Scripture as God's word. In most cases, the arguments used constitute genetic fallacies: something is good because it comes from a good tradition, or bad because it comes from a bad one. Thus, traditionalism weakens the cogency of theological argument.

Sola Scriptura, therefore, will guard us against bad speculation²¹ and philosophical imperialism. The point is not that philosophical terminology or argument is always bad, but rather that such terminology and argument must be tested by Scripture.

In using Scripture, my focus will not be primarily on the minute exegesis of individual texts, but on the major themes of Scripture, those teachings repeated over and over again in the canon's glorious redundancy. I offer the following reasons: (1) It has often been said that no doctrine should be based on a single text, and I agree, not because single texts lack authority, but because the church has wisely refused to give official sanction to ideas based on only one text. (2) I doubt that after two thousand years of Bible study in the Christian church, any new exegetical discov-

20. See the preceding note.

21. There is, I think, a good kind of speculation. That is to let our minds consider the range of possibilities that Scripture leaves open. That exercise increases our understanding of Scripture, because it helps us to see the precise location of the biblical boundaries of thought.

eries will warrant serious doctrinal change. (3) In the present theological situation, our main problem is not that of exegeting obscure texts, but rather the strange inability or reluctance of many to see what is big and bold and obvious.

I shall, then, include many references to biblical texts on particular subjects. Often, I shall just give the reference without comment, or quote the passage so that readers can see it for themselves. This approach may expose me to the charge of prooftexting, but see my defense of proof texts in *DKG*.²² I have thought about each passage cited and have taken its context (actually, its contexts)²³ into account. I cite so many passages to indicate the pervasiveness of these doctrines throughout the Bible, even though there is not room to discuss each one.

COVENANT LORDSHIP AND THE CENTRAL MESSAGE OF THE BIBLE

As for the criticism that the scholastic doctrines of God are to some extent irrelevant to the Christian life, we must remind ourselves that God is the supremely relevant one. Without him, nothing else could exist or function. Without him, there could be no meaning in life. Perhaps the scholastics still have much to teach us about what is truly relevant, as opposed to our typical modern preoccupations.

Nevertheless, one can ask significant questions about various specific assertions in the traditional doctrine of God. For example, is God supratemporal, is his goodness necessary or voluntary, and are his essence and existence identical? I believe these questions can be answered, but the answers are not obvious, and the scholastic theologians did not answer them persuasively.

Another way to look at this is to ask how these assertions are relevant to the gospel, the good news of salvation, the main theme of Scripture. It is not difficult to expound other loci as parts of the gospel: the doctrine of Scripture describes the authoritative source of the good news; the doctrine of man describes the desperate situation from which we need to be saved; the doctrine of Christ describes the Savior; the doctrine of salvation describes his saving work for us; the doctrine of the last days describes the completion of that work. But how is the simplicity of God related to our salvation? Why is it important to salvation to define the nature of divine omnipotence? Can God make a stone so large that he cannot lift it? Why should we have any interest in answering that question? Compared with

22. P. 197.

23. See *DKG*, 169–70, 194–214.

the other loci of systematic theology, the doctrine of God often seems like a collection of intellectual games.

Sola Scriptura will help us here too. We know that all of Scripture is about salvation, about Jesus (Luke 24:27; John 5:39; Rom. 15:4; 2 Tim. 3:15–16). If the doctrine of divine simplicity, say, is a biblical doctrine, then we can be sure that it will have some connection with salvation, and we should seek until we find it, as I will try to do in this volume. But if the doctrine is not biblical, it should be rejected.

In making such judgments, it may be helpful for us to make use of some central motifs, not as exclusive ways of conceiving of God, but as ways of keeping our eyes focused on the gospel. Being finite, we cannot look at everything in the Bible at once. We have to start somewhere, and it is best that our starting point be a matter of some fundamental importance.

The central motif of this book (in accordance with the general theme of the series) is that God is Lord of the covenant. Since God chose the name Lord (or Yahweh, from the Hebrew *yahweh*) for himself, since it is found thousands of times in Scripture, and since it is at the heart of the fundamental confession of faith of God's people (Deut. 6:4–5; Rom. 10:9), it would seem to be a promising starting point. Covenant lordship does not exclude other basic biblical themes, such as hope or community, or even liberation. Rather, it includes these other themes and helps us see how they are related. The concept of covenant, as I understand it, incorporates many diverse elements, so that it provides a key for us to understand how the other themes fit into the overall biblical story. And it often liberates us from the temptation to set one theme against another, even to affirm one and deny another, for in the covenant these apparently diverse concepts and themes display a wonderful unity.²⁴

So I will try to show how all of the acts, attributes, and personal distinctions that Scripture attributes to God are expressions of his lordship. God reveals all of these to us so that “you will know that I am the LORD your God” (Ex. 6:7).²⁵ This emphasis on the lordship of God (and particularly of Christ) will focus our attention on the main biblical message of salvation without ignoring or denying the large amount of biblical teaching on the nature and acts of God.

24. See my article, “Covenant and the Unity of Scripture,” available at the Third Millennium Web site, www.thirdmill.org.

25. This is a pervasive theme in Scripture. In Exodus alone, see 7:5, 17; 8:10, 22; 9:14, 29–30; 10:2; 14:4, 18; 16:12. God does what he does so that we may know that he is the Lord.

ENGAGEMENT WITH RECENT PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY

I mentioned that some responses to scholasticism (especially in recent years) compromise biblical teachings. I will need to look at some of those, in the interest of theology as application, and by way of contrast with the biblical teaching. I shall look at some of the recent philosophical and theological treatments of the doctrine of God, particularly those that have endorsed open theism.²⁶

The proper response to the challenge of open theism is not to compromise biblical teachings, but to press them all the more forcefully (yet graciously). My intention is not to mitigate in the slightest the biblical (and traditional Reformed) doctrine of divine sovereignty, but rather to expand it into areas of concern to the open theists. For example, the open theists have raised the question of how an atemporal God could know items of temporal experience, such as “the present time.” They have contended that to answer that question we need to eliminate the doctrine of divine atemporality. I shall argue, however (in chaps. 24–25), that God is both atemporal and present at every time, both transcendent over time and immanent in it, so that he sees the world from a supratemporal perspective and also from every temporal perspective. So the answer to the problem, in my view, is not to regard God as less sovereign, but as more so, ruling time both from above and from below.

These discussions of the current scene will not take up much space in the book. But I hope they will clarify my position by showing us how not to respond to scholasticism.

CHANGES IN THE ORDER OF TOPICS TO FACILITATE COMMUNICATION

I will also be dealing with some of the subheadings of the doctrine of God in an unconventional order. As I said earlier, I do not believe it makes much substantive theological difference what doctrine comes first and what comes second. But it can make some pedagogical difference.

26. There has been a renaissance of Christian philosophy over the last thirty years, led by people like Alvin Plantinga, William Alston, and Nicholas Wolterstorff. This development is exciting to me. When I studied philosophy from 1957 to 1961, one would have been laughed out of the classroom for suggesting that the biblical God might help in the solution of philosophical problems. But today many well-respected philosophers urge the philosophical relevance of the biblical, theistic worldview. Unfortunately, these thinkers tend to hold Arminian views of free will and limit biblical inerrancy. Some have given support to open theism.

Reformed theologies traditionally begin by discussing God's nature before his acts of creation, providence, and redemption, and they traditionally deal with the "incommunicable" attributes (such as eternity and simplicity) before the "communicable" attributes (such as wisdom, knowledge, justice, and love).²⁷

I will invert some of these traditional sequences in this book, for three reasons:

1. There is a biblical pattern of reasoning by which God's nature is discerned in his acts. The traditional order makes it difficult to describe this pattern. Thus, I shall discuss God's acts before his attributes.

2. The traditional order is best for those with some philosophical training and interests, who find it helpful to proceed from the abstract to the concrete, the eternal to the temporal, and so on. There was a time when we could assume that seminarians and pastors had this sort of philosophical training and interest, but that time is past. In general, I shall proceed from history to eternity, from the ethical to the metaphysical, from the communicable to the incommunicable. That, I think, will make the overall argument more intelligible and interesting to contemporary readers.

3. In Scripture, the ethical qualities of God (such as love, justice, and mercy) are no less fundamental than his metaphysical qualities (such as eternity, immensity, and simplicity). Indeed, the passages that come closest to defining God speak of him in ethical terms (Ex. 33:19; 34:6; 1 John 4:8). This point will be easier to make in a somewhat changed order of topics: first the ethical attributes, and then the others.

My intention here is not to develop a "theology from below," as some contemporary writers understand that phrase.²⁸ That language indicates a plan of starting with a religiously neutral analysis of the history of Israel and Jesus, in the hope that from that analysis we can derive our Christian theological convictions about God and Christ. On the contrary, my methodology will be governed by God's revelation in Scripture and will thus be "theology from above," in the usual understanding of that phrase.²⁹ But Scripture does speak of this world as well as the next, of earth as well as heaven. A good teacher often starts with the present focus of his students' attention and moves from there to teach them what they don't know. So Scripture often begins with earthly things to teach us heavenly things. Ac-

27. I shall later indicate some reservations about the distinction between "incommunicable" and "communicable."

28. See, for example, Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Christology from Below," in his *Jesus: God and Man* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968), 34–35.

29. Remember, though, my point in *DKG* that one cannot understand Scripture without understanding the world to which it applies. See *DKG*, 66–69, 73–75.

cordingly, this book will be a theology from above that sometimes, with biblical precedent, and without any pretense of religious neutrality,³⁰ begins pedagogically with what is from below.

THE STRUCTURE OF THIS VOLUME

I shall begin with a general study of the covenant lordship of God. *Lord* is, first of all, a proper name, and therefore the Lord is personal. But he is unique among persons. Our appropriate response to the Lord is reverent awe and worship. In this attitude, we recognize a person who is holy: incomparably great and wonderful, majestic, exalted, and transcendent. This holy being stands in a special relationship to us: he is the head of the covenant.

So the Lord is, first of all, a holy person, our covenant Lord. But further study reveals more specific connotations of the term *Lord*. As in *DKG*, I shall refer to these lordship attributes as control, authority, and presence, and I shall spend some time expounding them. As in *DKG*, the three lordship attributes will generate a number of triadic distinctions,³¹ preparing us for the discussion of the Trinity toward the end.³²

The Lord in Scripture reveals himself in three ways: by a narrative of his

30. In the final analysis, Christians can only reason as Christians. Every thought must be brought captive to Christ (2 Cor. 10:5); there is no neutrality. I have discussed this point often in earlier books. See also my response to Richard Muller in “In Defense of Something Close to Biblicism.”

31. Readers should make up their own minds as to how seriously they should take all these triads. I vacillate in my own thinking about them. Sometimes I think that I have uncovered a deep layer of Trinitarian meaning in the Scriptures; at other times I think I have merely hit upon a useful pedagogical device. And there are times when I think even less of the scheme—as a kind of mental crutch, or at worst a procrustean bed for theological formulations. Certainly I am trying to avoid the worst kind of schematic thinking, in which the main motive is to make the scheme work, even at the expense of exegetical cogency. But the triads nevertheless continue to appeal to me as somehow appropriate to the biblical story, and so I continue to use them.

32. I disagree with Paul Jewett’s contention that “to discuss the nature and attributes of God before the doctrine of the Trinity, as has been traditionally done, leaves one open to a natural theology whose subject is just God in the general sense rather than the God who is the proper subject of all Christian theology—namely, the God who is revealed in Christ the Son through the Holy Spirit” (*God, Creation, and Revelation* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991], 342–43). Compare the even more extreme language of Jürgen Moltmann in *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 17. In a systematic theology, every part should presuppose every other, so that it does not much matter what is discussed first. Further, it is not wrong to talk about God without explicit reflection on the Trinitarian distinctions. To condemn such a way of speaking is to condemn most of the Old Testament.

acts, by authoritative descriptions of his nature, and by revealing something of his inner life through the Trinitarian persons. These correspond respectively to the lordship attributes of control, authority, and presence.

The narrative of God's actions can be further subdivided into narratives of creation, decree, and redemption. God's authoritative descriptions include images, attributes, and names. And God's inner life consists of a communion among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each of these concepts will have further subdivisions. The attributes of God will be distinguished as those of goodness, those of knowledge, and those of power.

So the following outline indicates the main divisions of the book. The triadic structure may help the reader to conceptualize the overall biblical doctrine of God. But the content within the structure is, of course, far more important.

- I. The Lord
 - A. Initial Observations
 - 1. A Person
 - 2. Holy
 - 3. Head of the Covenant
 - B. Lordship Attributes
 - 1. Control
 - 2. Authority
 - 3. Presence
- II. Some Problem Areas
 - A. Human Responsibility and Freedom
 - B. The Problem of Evil
- III. A Philosophy of Lordship
 - A. Ethics
 - B. Epistemology
 - C. Metaphysics
- IV. The Narrative of God's Actions
 - A. God's Working in Creation
 - 1. Miracle
 - 2. Providence
 - 3. Creation *ex Nihilo*
 - B. God's Eternal Decree

- C. Redemption

- V. Authoritative Descriptions of God

- A. Names

- B. Images

- C. Attributes

- 1. Love

- 2. Knowledge

- 3. Power

- VI. The Trinitarian Persons

- A. Father

- B. Son

- C. Spirit

This outline does not correspond precisely to the chapter divisions, to the length of the discussions, or to the order of topics. For some of the categories, there will be more than one chapter, because of the relatively large number of issues to be discussed. In other cases, more than one of the above divisions may be included in a chapter. I will not devote a specific section of the book to redemption (IV, C), since that topic is usually discussed under loci other than the doctrine of God. But this volume will be more concerned with redemption than are most traditional treatments of the doctrine of God, because of its emphasis on God's covenant lordship.