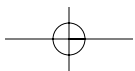
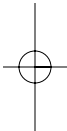
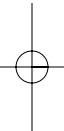


THE
DOCTRINE
OF GOD



A THEOLOGY OF LORDSHIP

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THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

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Italics in Scripture quotations indicate emphasis added.

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Frame, John M., 1939–

The doctrine of God / John M. Frame.

p. cm. — (A theology of lordship)

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and indexes.

ISBN-10: 0-87552-263-7

ISBN-13: 978-0-87552-263-0

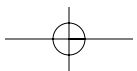
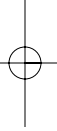
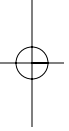
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To Justin

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“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.

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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.

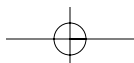
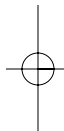
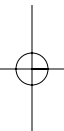
Again, I want to thank all of those who have helped me to think through these matters, including my negative critics. As I approach this particular subject, I feel especially indebted to my teachers and colleagues, living and departed, who have taught the doctrine of God: Cornelius Van Til, John Murray, 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)
<i>Institutes</i>	John Calvin, <i>Institutes of the Christian Religion</i> , ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, <i>The Library of Christian Classics</i> (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>

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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.