

THE DOCTRINE  
OF THE  
CHRISTIAN LIFE

# A THEOLOGY OF LORDSHIP

A SERIES BY JOHN M. FRAME

Also available in the series:

*The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*

*The Doctrine of God*

THE DOCTRINE  
OF THE  
CHRISTIAN LIFE

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JOHN M. FRAME

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*To Johnny*

And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” (Matt. 22:37–40)

Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first.” (Mark 10:29–31)

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Eph. 2:8–10)

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. (1 Cor. 10:31)

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Appendix K: Review of R. F. R. Gardner, *Abortion: The Personal Dilemma*

Appendix L: Review of Beverly Wildung Harrison, *Our Right to Choose: Toward a New Ethic of Abortion*



## Preface

This volume will deal mostly with ethics, but also with a number of other subjects, grouped around the general title *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (henceforth *DCL*). The ethics course I taught at Westminster Seminary had that title, but it was James Hurley, as I recall, who suggested to me that the Christian life was much more than ethics. The Christian life is not only a matter of following rules of morality, but a dynamic experience: living in the fallen world, in fellowship with the living God. So in this book I will discuss not only ethics (the normative perspective), but also the culture in which we live (the situational perspective) and the resources of redemption on which we draw daily (the existential perspective).<sup>1</sup>

I suppose, given my perspectival orientation, I could stretch the meaning of ethics to include the other two disciplines (and vice versa), but I should admit at the outset that this book does go beyond ethics as ethics is usually conceived.

Most of the book, however, will deal with ethics in the usual sense, for that is what I know most about. Yet I have always felt a certain uneasiness with the discipline.

I cringed a bit in 1968 when my senior colleague, Norman Shepherd, asked me to teach the course in ethics. But it was my first teaching job, at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia, and I probably would not have refused any assignment. Shepherd evidently thought me qualified because ethics is partly a philosophical discipline, and I had studied philosophy at Princeton and Yale. Cornelius Van Til had, in past years, taught a philosophically oriented ethics course at Westminster, and I was much impressed

1. I shall discuss these “perspectives” in this volume, as I have in the other volumes of this series. The triperspectival scheme actually originated in my ethics teaching, and, in a way, ethics is its natural home. I have applied it to epistemology in *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, because I believe that epistemology can be fruitfully analyzed as a subdivision of ethics. And many other applications of this approach have occurred to me, which I have presented in *The Doctrine of God* and intend to present in other books of this series. But readers who are not yet comfortable with this approach may find that the present volume presents it in areas where it is most clearly and obviously useful. And if you don’t find it persuasive in this volume, you probably won’t find it persuasive anywhere.

by his thinking.<sup>2</sup> I also believed that in ethics, as in all theological disciplines, biblical exegesis must have the final say. John Murray had taught an exegetically oriented ethics course at the seminary, and I greatly admired his writings in the field.<sup>3</sup> Even at that time, too, I was convinced that theology had to speak to the lives of people, not just to their intellectual conceptions. Shepherd knew these things about me, so he probably thought that I was suited to teach this kind of course.

As a matter of fact, however, I had always been rather uncomfortable in the field of ethics. As a philosophy major at Princeton, I had avoided every opportunity to take a course in ethics, even though I could have studied under Paul Ramsey, who had a huge reputation in the field. I likewise avoided ethics courses at Yale, though James Gustafson taught ethics during my years there. The only course in ethics I had ever taken was the two-credit-hour course I took at Westminster as part of the required curriculum. At that time, neither Van Til nor Murray was teaching the course, but rather Edwin H. Palmer. Palmer did what he could in the time he had available, but, though I loved him as a teacher and as a man, his course did not make much of an impression on me.

My aversion to ethics was mainly an aversion to the secular ethics literature, which, of course, even we nonsecularists are expected to read in preparing lectures and books. That literature seemed to me to be very confused indeed: overly dogmatic on some points (the pieties of liberalism) and relativistic on all others. I soon came to see this in the light of Van Til's insight that non-Christian thought is always both rationalistic and irrationalistic. But that insight left me with little motivation to study the literature on ethics, beyond the writings of Van Til, Murray, and others in the evangelical and Reformed theological traditions.

Over the years, however, I have gained a greater appreciation of the secular literature. Non-Christians often have a better grasp than Christians of the complications of ethical decision making. They may be ultimately confused, but at least they can help us define the options. And, given the multiplicity of options, this literature can help us to sympathize more with those who are wrestling with hard questions and can increase our humility as we come to admit our own uncertainty. Christianity, unlike any other ethical system, provides a solid basis for ethical decision making, but it does not make ethical decisions easy.

So here I am writing a book mostly on ethics, based on a love-hate relationship with the field that goes back forty-five years.

2. See his *Christian Theistic Ethics* ([Ripon, CA: den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1971).

3. *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957); *Divorce* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1961).

In the Theology of Lordship series, I had intended this to be the fourth of four volumes (putting it off as long as possible). My original plan was to write *The Doctrine of the Word of God (DWG)* following *The Doctrine of God (DG)*, which was published in 2002. But I decided to produce the present volume before *DWG*. I had already written much more material on ethics than on the Word of God. I had a 250-page lecture outline and maybe thirty supplementary papers that I had used in my classes. It seemed to me, therefore, that this book could be written much more quickly than *DWG*.

My original idea was to start the series with *DWG*, setting forth the basis for everything to come, followed by *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God (DKG)*, since our knowledge of God is based on his Word. Then would have come *DG*, giving the content of that knowledge, and finally the present volume, indicating the kind of life that is consistent with the knowledge of God.

More recently, however, I have been inclined toward a different order of topics:

1. *DG*, since God himself is the foundation of everything, including his Word
2. *DWG*, describing how he communicates with us
3. *DKG*, indicating how we gain knowledge from the Word
4. *DCL*, indicating the life that is warranted by this knowledge

But this order fails to indicate a major theme of this series, namely, that our knowledge of God is a subdivision of ethics (that is, thinking is part of life). That consideration would suggest a reversal of items 3 and 4 in the above list, putting *DKG* last. This is not to say that my other suggested orders are wrong. Rather, the point is that the four topics are interdependent, indeed “perspectival.” If we put *DKG* last, for example, how can we account for the fact that the other three areas must be governed by a biblical epistemology?

I wish to express my thanks again to all who have encouraged and stimulated my thinking over the years, especially my students, who have been a captive audience for the testing of this material. I thank many for giving me criticism and other feedback on previous volumes in the series. Many offered kind words about *The Doctrine of God*, and I am especially thankful to the Evangelical Christian Booksellers Association for giving to that book their Gold Medallion award for 2003 in the area of theology and doctrine.

The only substantial negative criticism of *DG* among reviewers was that it made insufficient use of the historical tradition. That criticism leaves me a bit perplexed, because I cited a great many historical and contemporary

sources in the volume. How much more of this should I have done in a volume that was already 888 pages long?

Is the point of that criticism that I did not include a thorough, systematic history of the doctrine of God? To that I answer simply that an author cannot do everything in one volume. *DG* was, of course, deeply influenced by many historical and contemporary currents of thought. But its purpose was to set forth biblical teaching, not to list all those currents. Surely it is not wrong for an author to write a book expounding biblical themes without also feeling it necessary to address historical themes and contemporary discussions in systematic detail.

My purpose in writing *DG* was not simply, or even primarily, to expound the doctrines, but mainly to establish their foundation, to persuade readers that they are true. *DG* is an argumentative book. Ultimately, for those who believe in *sola Scriptura*, the only way to establish the truth of doctrines is to appeal to Scripture. It might have been helpful for me to include more historical material to help people understand the doctrines better, to understand why they have been formulated as they have been. But I cannot think of a single instance where additional historical citations would have made my presentations of these doctrines more persuasive.

Given *sola Scriptura* (about which I will say more in chapter 11 of this book), even when a theologian does cite historical sources, including confessions, it is then necessary to go back to Scripture to establish the truth of what those sources say.<sup>4</sup> The main value of the confessions, then, is to mediate the biblical teaching. But is it too much to ask that in an 888-page book I might occasionally bypass the middle man?

Another question occurs: Is it possible that the desire of some for a more ecclesiastical and historical focus is related to the hyperhistorical trend in evangelical scholarship that I criticized in “*Sola Scriptura* in Theological Method”<sup>5</sup> and in “Traditionalism”?<sup>6</sup>

At any rate, readers and reviewers are advised that in this respect the present volume will be like *DG*. Although I shall include here many references to secular and Christian sources, historical and contemporary, my purpose, as in *DG*, is not to exposit the history of these doctrines, but to present and defend what I consider to be the biblical

4. A former colleague has described this procedure, not favorably, as “zero-based budgeting.” If that is a fault, I plead guilty. Zero-based budgeting in theology is a good thing, a necessary consequence of *sola Scriptura*. I am thankful to Luther and Calvin that they did not merely assume the truth of their traditions, but brought them under the scrutiny of Scripture. They were zero-based budgeters with a vengeance.

5. Appendix 2 in Frame, *Contemporary Worship Music: A Biblical Defense* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1997), 175–201.

6. Available at <http://reformedperspectives.org> and <http://www.frame-poythress.org>.

position. Everything else will serve that purpose, and thus the book will be inadequate for other purposes.

I should mention that the Bible quotations in this book come from the English Standard Version. This is a change from the previous books in the Lordship series.

I wish to thank Reformed Theological Seminary, which has provided the best possible working environment for me as a teacher and writer. I'm also grateful to Richard Pratt, Ra McLaughlin, and the staff of Third Millennium Ministries, for putting together a video series with me on the subject of ethics, helping me to rethink a number of formulations. I am also grateful to P&R Publishing, with whom I have had a great working relationship over the years, and especially to Jim Scott, who edited this book for them.