



PART 1

Theology and Theological Method

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A Primer on Perspectivalism

PERSPECTIVALISM is a name that has come to refer to some aspects of my theological method and that of my friend and colleague Vern Poythress. We have set it forth especially in Poythress's *Symphonic Theology*¹ and Frame's *DKG*, and we have applied this method in a number of other writings.

Recently, someone asked whether there were an article-length introduction to perspectivalism, and I had to admit that there was not. There are some *fairly* concise introductions,² but nothing of "article length." Seeing that as a genuine need, I will try to meet it here.³

Perspectivalism in General

I employ perspectivalisms of two kinds: as a general concept, and as a more specific method. The general concept is simply that because

1. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987, also available at http://www.frame-poythress.org/poythress_books.htm.

2. Poythress's *Symphonic Theology* is more concise, certainly, than my *DKG*. The student of perspectivalism might also look at my short book *Perspectives on the Word of God* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999), also available at <http://reformedperspectives.org> (search under this title). Chapters 3 and 4 of my *DCL* introduce the subject as it pertains to ethics, and the first seven chapters of my *DG* develop an exegetical argument for the concept of divine lordship that underlies this approach. There is also an old lecture of mine, "Epistemological Perspectives and Evangelical Apologetics," from 1982, given before the Evangelical Theological Society, that introduces these concepts as they pertain to apologetics. It is available at http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/1982Epistemological.html. And my student and good friend Joe Torres has summarized my approach in a Wikipedia article about me: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Frame. Cf. also mini-descriptions and defenses of the concept in *DG*, app. C, 767–68, and in my article "Machen's Warrior Children," in *Alister E. McGrath and Evangelical Theology*, ed. Sung Wook Chung (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), also available at http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/2003Machen.htm.

3. I absolutely forbid anyone to call it "Perspectivalism for Dummies."

we are not God, because we are finite, not infinite, we cannot know everything at a glance, and therefore our knowledge is limited to one perspective or another.

God knows absolutely everything, because he planned everything, made everything, and determines what happens in the world he made. So we describe him as omniscient. One interesting implication of God's omniscience is that he not only knows all the facts about himself and the world, but also knows how everything appears from every possible perspective. If a fly were on my office wall, my typing would look very different to that fly from the way it looks to me. But God knows not only everything about my typing, but also how that typing appears to the fly on the wall. Indeed, because God knows hypothetical situations as well as actualities, God knows exhaustively what a fly in that position would experience—*if* such a fly were present, even if it is not. God's knowledge, then, is not only omniscient, but omniperspectival. God knows from his own infinite perspective; but that infinite perspective includes a knowledge of all created perspectives, possible and actual.

But we are different. We are finite, and our knowledge is finite. I can know the world only from the limited perspective of my own body and mind. The effects of this finitude, and even more of sin, should caution us against cocksureness in our claims to knowledge. I am not saying that we should doubt everything. Certainly my limited perspective gives me no excuse to doubt that I have five fingers, or that $2 + 2 = 4$, or that God exists.⁴ Our finitude does not imply that all our knowledge is erroneous, or that certainty is impossible.⁵ But we do, in most situations, need to guard against mistakes.

One way to increase our knowledge and our level of certainty is by supplementing our own perspectives with those of others. When our own resources fail us, we can consult friends, authorities, books, and so on. We can travel to other places, visit people of other cultures.

4. Romans 1:18–32 teaches that the existence of the God of Scripture is clear, even known, to all human beings. Thus the profession of agnosticism or atheism, or the acknowledgment of a different God, is the repression of knowledge. People disbelieve, though they know better.

5. How certainty can be obtained is discussed in my *DKG*. See also my article "Certainty" at http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/2005Certainty.htm, chapter 41 on "Assurance" in *DWG*, and corresponding chapters in my *ST*.

Even to get a good understanding of a tree, we need to walk around it, look at it from many angles.

It often happens that someone's idea will seem ridiculous when we first encounter it; but when we try to understand where that person is coming from, what considerations have led him to his idea, then our evaluation of it changes. In such a case, we are trying to see the issue from his perspective, and that perspective enriches our own.

In one sense, of course, it is impossible to transcend one's own perspective. Even when we move around a tree, or consult a friend, or travel to another culture, we are still viewing reality through our own senses and brains. Yet it is possible for the perspectives of others to change our perspective, to make us see differently.

This does not mean, of course, that all ideas are equally true, or equally false. It does not mean that as our perspective grows larger, we inevitably agree with everybody else. I do think that a broadening of perspective usually leads to a greater appreciation of the viewpoints of others. But sometimes a growth in perspective has the opposite effect: it convinces us that the view we are investigating is simply wrong. There is nothing about perspectivalism that eliminates the distinctions between right and wrong, true and false. So perspectivalism is not relativistic, as is sometimes charged.⁶

Rather, it presupposes absolutism. To say that our own views are finite is to contrast them with the absolute, infinite viewpoint of God himself. And we are able to consult God and, through his Word and prayer, in some measure to access his infinite perspective. I say "in some measure." We will never have God's exhaustive knowledge of reality (not even in heaven). And we will never know the world in the same way God knows it, for to do that we would have to be God. But when God speaks to us in Scripture and grants us wisdom in response to prayer, the human knowledge we obtain is warranted by his own exhaustive

6. It is somewhat unfortunate that the name *perspectivalism* has been attached to the view I am advocating. I'm not sure who is responsible for the name; maybe I am. But the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche sometimes described his own view as *perspectivism* (note the different spelling), and in my judgment Nietzsche's perspectivism is indeed relativist, though there is some wisdom to be gained from his observations. The same may be said of the perspectivalism (he did use the *-al* suffix) of Charles Sanders Peirce.

perspective, the perspective that includes all other perspectives. For example, Scripture tells me that God created the heavens and the earth. That knowledge can never be invalidated by any other perspective. It is true from any possible perspective.⁷

Again, it is not that we come to look at things from God's perspective rather than our own. We are not God, so we cannot see things as he does. And we can never step out of our own skin, so to speak, and set aside the perspective of our own thoughts and bodies. But as we can enrich our perspective by looking at things from different angles (a tree, in the example above), by consulting other people, and by observing other places and cultures, much more can we enrich it by consulting God's perspective.

In this sense, the truth in one perspective includes the truth of all the others, including God's. To maximize my own knowledge, I need the knowledge of everyone else, especially that of God. So to see everything perfectly from my own perspective involves seeing everything from everyone else's perspective, and from God's. In that sense, finite perspectives are dependent on God's and interdependent on one another's. My perspective should ideally include yours, and vice versa. An exhaustive view of the universe from my perspective (if that were possible, which it is not) would have to be enriched by yours and everyone else's, including that of God, and, indeed, that of the fly on my wall. So my perspective must include yours, and yours must include mine. In that sense, all finite perspectives are *interdependent*. God's perspective is independent in a way that our perspectives are not, for God governs all perspectives. But even his knowledge, as we have seen, includes a knowledge of all finite perspectives. And all finite perspectives must, to attain truth, "think God's thoughts after him."⁸ So in one sense, all perspectives coincide.

7. I am here, of course, simplifying the hermeneutical issue. Surely we do make mistakes in biblical interpretation, and those mistakes, like others, can be alleviated by broader perspectives. But the ultimate goal of hermeneutics is, with the above qualifications, to attain the divine perspective. I believe that, at least with relatively simple texts such as Genesis 1:1, the church has attained that perspective. But more must be said, of course, and I address some of those issues in *DWG*. See also Vern S. Poythress, *God-Centered Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1999).

8. I have discussed at length in *DKG*, 18–40, and in *CVT*, 97–113, how the so-called "contents" of God's mind differ from the "contents" of man's. This difficult question was debated

Each, when fully informed, includes all the knowledge found in every other. There is one truth, and each perspective is merely an angle from which that truth can be viewed.

We will never achieve perfect knowledge of that one truth, but we advance toward it step by step. That advance always involves enriching our present perspectives by referring to those of others. The work of attaining knowledge, therefore, is always communal. And inevitably it involves reference to the perfect, exhaustive perspective of God, insofar as he has revealed it to us.

Often, however, God's revelation to us of his own perspective is itself multiperspectival in structure. He has, for example, given us four gospels, rather than one. It is important for us to hear the story of Jesus from four different perspectives. God's perspective, in this case, embraces those of the four gospel writers. His infinite perspective validates those four human perspectives and commends them to all of us. Similarly, God has given us both Kings and Chronicles, though these books overlap in many ways. He has also given us both a prose account (Ex. 12–14) and a poetic account (Ex. 15:1–18) of his deliverance of Israel from Egypt. Many of the psalms, too, give us poetic accounts of what other Scriptures present in prose narrative. There are two givings of the law (Ex. 20:1–17; Deut. 5:1–21). Paul often repeats his ideas (as Rom. 12 and 1 Cor. 12), adding and subtracting matters of interest, varying their contexts.

Scripture, of course, is written by human authors together with the divine Author. God reveals himself by inspiring human beings. He generally does not dictate, but rather enables them to write consistently with their own gifts, education, and personalities, that is, their own perspectives. And by such divine enablement, each author writes exactly

during the controversy in the 1940s between Cornelius Van Til and Gordon H. Clark. My own view is that whatever is in God's mind inevitably differs from everything in a man's, for God's mind is the ultimate Creator of the human mind, as well as its criterion of truth and its sustenance. Even in the area of thought and knowledge, therefore, the Creator-creature distinction is inviolate. This does not imply, however, that God and man cannot know the same propositions. The common expression "think God's thoughts after him" should be understood to express both the continuities ("think God's thoughts") and the discontinuities ("after him") between God's knowledge and ours.

what God wants him to write. And God often determines that his truth is best conveyed by multiple human perspectives rather than just one. In Scripture, all those human perspectives convey truth, and all are warranted by God's infinite perspective, though none is identical with that divine perspective. This is what we should expect, since God has created us as people who learn through multiperspectival experience.

Triperspectivalism

Now, if perspectivalism is true in general, it is an important part of human knowledge to focus on specific differences of perspective. So, for example, NT scholars often give attention to the samenesses and differences of the four Gospels. This is a legitimate study, though it is often done without adequate regard to the unity of Scripture. In my *DCL*, I argue that the Ten Commandments provide ten perspectives on human life. It is not that each commandment deals with a *part* of Christian ethics; rather, each commandment deals with the whole, from a particular perspective. We might call such an approach to Christian ethics *decaperspectivalism*.

But Poythress and I emphasize especially the importance of a set of threefold distinctions, or triads, that have come to be known as *triperspectivalism*. Many people have seen a certain mystery in the number three. But in Scripture there is a pervasive pattern of threefold distinctions that, though mysterious, provide us with considerable illumination.

The Trinity

The greatest mystery in Scripture and Christian theology is, of course, the mystery of the Holy Trinity.⁹ We worship one God, but that one God is three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The three persons are one God, not many. The nature of each person is divine. Each person has all the divine attributes, and in every act of God the

9. For a much more thorough account of the doctrine of the Trinity and its biblical basis, see my *DG*, 619–735. See also Poythress's application of this doctrine to logic and epistemology in "Reforming Ontology and Logic in the Light of the Trinity: An Application of Van Til's Idea of Analogy," *WTJ* 57, 1 (1995): 187–219, also available at http://www.frame-poythress.org/poythress_articles/1995Reforming.htm.

three persons equally participate. The three persons are equal in honor and glory; they are equally (and uniquely) the object of our worship.

The three persons, however, are not identical to one another. They are in various ways distinct. Theologians have explored concepts such as *eternal generation* and *eternal procession*: the Father eternally begets the Son, not the other way around, and the Spirit proceeds from the Father and Son, not the other way around. The Bible also records divine acts that are specific to one of the persons or another. It was the Son, not the Father or Spirit, who became incarnate, died for our sins, and rose again. It is the Father, not the Son or Spirit, who effectually calls us into fellowship with himself. And it is the Spirit, not the Father or Son, who regenerates believers and gives them gifts to serve in the church. Still, even in these actions, all three of the persons are active. Although the Son, not the Father, became incarnate, the Father was present with him in his incarnate life. And although the Son, not the Father, died on the cross, the Father was active in the atonement, giving him up for us all (Rom. 8:32). To summarize: even in the distinct actions of each person, the other persons are involved. Or, as Scripture sometimes puts it, the Father and Spirit are “in” the Son; the Son is “in” the Father; and the Spirit is the Spirit of the Son and of the Father.¹⁰

It is tempting, therefore, for us to formulate the doctrine of the Trinity by saying that the three persons are “perspectives” on the Godhead and on one another. But that would be misleading. *Perspective* does not exhaust the ways in which the three persons are distinct. To say that the three persons are merely perspectives on the Godhead would be a Sabellian position, the idea that the differences of the persons are merely differences in the way we look at the one God. Such an approach would reduce the Trinitarian distinctions to distinctions within our own subjectivity. That certainly is not right.

It is correct to say that the three persons are really persons. They interact with one another in ways similar to the ways in which human beings interact with one another. They talk together, plan together, express love for one another. So their relation is far more than merely perspectival.

10. This mutual indwelling of the persons in one another is called *circumincessio* or *perichoresis*.

But if the three persons are not *mere* perspectives on the Godhead, they nevertheless *are* perspectives. They are more than perspectives, but not less. For as I have indicated, each of the three persons bears the whole divine nature, with all the divine attributes. Each is *in* each of the others. So you cannot fully know the Son without knowing the Father and Spirit, and so on. Although the three persons are distinct, our knowledge of each involves knowledge of the others, so that for us knowledge of the Father coincides with knowledge of the Son and Spirit.

Let us now explore a bit more fully the nature of our human perspectival knowledge of the three persons of the Trinity. Although all three persons are active in every act of God,¹¹ there seems to be a general division of labor among the persons in the work of redemption. The Father establishes the eternal plan of salvation, the Son executes it, and the Spirit applies it to people. It was the Father who sent the Son to redeem us, the Son who accomplished redemption, and the Spirit who applies the benefits of Christ's atonement to believers. Recall John Murray's book *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*:¹² under "redemption accomplished," Murray discusses the atonement, completed once for all. Under "redemption applied," he discusses the *ordo salutis*, the ways in which the Spirit applies the work of Christ to believers (effectual calling, regeneration, conversion, justification, etc.).

Generalizing, we gather that the Father is the supreme *authority*, the Son the *executive power*, and the Spirit the divine *presence* who dwells in and with God's people.

Now, of course, redemption is meaningless without all three of these aspects. Without an authoritative plan, an effectual accomplishment, and a gracious application, none of these has meaning. The application is necessarily the application of Christ's finished work according to the divine plan. The atonement is necessarily the fulfillment of the Father's plan, and without the Spirit's work it does not save. So the plan is not efficacious without the atonement and the application.

11. That is to say, every act *ad extra*, every act that has some reference to the creation. There are also divine acts *ad intra*, acts within the divine nature itself, such as the Father's begetting the Son, which are *not* acts in which three persons cooperate, but acts of one person alone.

12. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955.

So we cannot know any of these adequately without knowing the others. Although the three are distinguishable, our knowledge of each is a perspective on the others and on the whole. To know the Spirit's work, we must see it as an application of the Son's work by the Father's plan. Similarly with knowing the work of the Father and Son.

So our *knowledge* of the work of the three persons is perspectival. In a sense, these divine works are also perspectival in their *nature*. Although they are distinguishable, it is important to realize that the divine plan includes the atonement and its application; the atonement is the out-working of the plan and the event to be applied; and the application is the application of the plan and the atonement. As is the Trinity itself, these divine acts are mysteriously one and many.

Divine Lordship

So we have a general distinction in God's redemption between authority, power, and presence. Each of these is a necessary aspect of divine redemption, and none of them makes sense without the others. Each includes the others in one sense. These same concepts appear in an analysis of divine lordship.¹³

By *Lord* I refer to the mysterious name of Exodus 3:14–15, read *Yahweh* by scholars, but *LORD* in most English translations. With its Hebrew synonym *Adon* and its Greek equivalent *kurios*, it is found over seven thousand times in Scripture, mostly as a name of God and often applied to Jesus Christ. It is central in the biblical story. God says that this is his memorial name forever (Ex. 3:15), and he performs many mighty works so that people “shall know that I am the LORD” (e.g., Ex. 14:4). The fundamental confessions of faith of both Testaments (Deut. 6:4–5; Rom. 10:9–10; 1 Cor. 12:3; Phil. 2:11) are confessions of lordship. One may say that the basic message of the OT is “God is LORD” and that the basic message of the NT is “Jesus Christ is Lord.”

In passages such as Exodus 3:20; 33:19; 34:6–7; and Isaiah 40–66, which underscore and expound the lordship of God, three themes appear

13. In my writing, the most extensive exegetical account of divine lordship is found in the first seven chapters of *DG*.

prominently: the Lord is (1) the One who *controls* all things by his mighty power; (2) the One who speaks with absolute *authority*, rightly requiring all to obey, and (3) the One who gives himself to his people in covenant intimacy: “I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God” (Ex. 6:7). I call the third concept *presence* because God often expresses it by saying, “I will be with you” (e.g., Isa. 43:2), and he makes that presence tangible in such theophanies as the cloud and fire that led Israel through the wilderness, the *shekinah* glory that dwelt in the tabernacle and temple, the incarnation of Christ, and the Holy Spirit’s indwelling of believers.

Again, the three concepts are perspectively related. Each implies the others and involves the others.

The Decalogue is a good example of this threefold structure.¹⁴ It begins with God’s identifying himself by his name, *LORD*. Then there is a brief account (called by scholars a *historical prologue*) of God’s past benefits to Israel (“who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery”). The historical prologue displays God’s gracious power, his *control* over events on Israel’s behalf. Then there are commands, which display his *authority*. Mixed with the commands, there are sanctions: blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. This indicates the *presence* of the Lord to continue administering the covenant with Israel.

Revelation

Scripture teaches a corresponding threefold structure in divine revelation. There is “general” revelation, God’s revelation in creation (Ps. 19:1; Rom. 1). Then there is “special” revelation, God’s revelation in words, through a direct voice (Ex. 19–20), prophets (Deut. 18), apostles (John 14:26), and writing (Ex. 31:18; Josh. 1:8; 2 Tim. 3:16). A third form of revelation is described in Matthew 11:27 and Ephesians 1:17 in which

14. I follow Meredith Kline’s argument that the Decalogue, and Deuteronomy as well, have the literary structure of covenant documents. *Covenant*, of course, is the fundamental relation between Yahweh and Israel, and the *new covenant* is the fundamental relation between Christ and the redeemed. *Lord* denotes the relation of a covenant head to his vassals. So lordship and covenant go together.

God reveals Christ to a person's heart. This is sometimes described as *illumination*, or as the *internal testimony of the Holy Spirit*. I sometimes call it *existential revelation*.

God reveals himself as Lord. So his revelation parallels his lordship attributes. General revelation particularly manifests his control, for his power is exhaustive and universal, so that everything reveals him. Special revelation corresponds especially to his authority, for when God speaks to us, his words serve as ultimate norm for those who hear. Existential revelation is a form of God's presence with his human creatures.

The Bible is the written form of God's special revelation. (Other forms include God's oral speech through theophany, prophets, and apostles.) The Bible plays a special role, for it serves as the covenant document, the ultimate governing constitution of God's people (see texts above). As such, we may not question or disobey what it says.¹⁵

The Offices of Christ

The Reformed confessions and other theological documents often discuss the three offices of Christ as Prophet, Priest, and King. These offices reflect the same categories we have seen earlier. His kingship represents his *control*, his prophetic office his *authority* as the Word of God, and his priesthood his work on behalf of his people in history, what we have called his *presence*.

Since believers are united with Christ, many have drawn analogies between these offices and the status of believers. We, too, are prophets in the sense that we bear the gospel message to the world. We are kings in that "all things are ours" (cf. 1 Cor. 3:21–23). And we are priests in the sense of 1 Peter 2:9 (what the Reformers called "the priesthood of all believers"). In turn, these offices have been seen as models for church officers: the teaching elder (1 Tim. 5:17) represents especially God's authority, the ruling elder (same verse) God's control, and the deacon the priestly ministry of mercy. As perspectives, none of these gifts can function adequately without the others. But sometimes one or another is more prominent. Indeed, there are sometimes imbalances in churches

15. I have developed this understanding of revelation in more detail in *DWG*.

that have too much emphasis on teaching, discipline, or mercy at the expense of the others.¹⁶

Aspects of Salvation

Salvation involves: (1) God's acting mightily in history to redeem his people, his controlling power expressing itself in grace. The historical prologue of the Decalogue is a good example of this. This historical action is what we earlier called *redemption accomplished*. (2) God's speaking an authoritative word to proclaim this grace and to indicate his people's continuing obligations to him. Theologically speaking, this is the "law of God." (3) God's coming to be among and within his people. This is "redemption applied." Again, three aspects, corresponding to the three lordship attributes. None of these functions without the others. So each is a perspective on the whole process of salvation. Again, there are dangers in overemphasizing one of these over against the others.

Human Knowledge of God

A biblical epistemology will also acknowledge these three elements. Secular epistemologies have found it difficult to relate sense experience, reason, and feelings in their accounts of human knowledge. They have also been perplexed by the relation of the subject (the knower), the object (what the knower knows), and the norms or rules of knowledge (logic, reason, etc.).

In Scripture, sense experience (as in 1 John 1:1–3) presents us with the truth. But that truth must be understood in the light of God's norms, his verbal revelation. And the knower must not resist the truth. He or she must be in proper shape to receive it (Rom. 1).

So God has placed the knowing subject into fruitful contact with the objects of knowledge, with the mediation of God's revealed norms for knowledge, particularly the primacy of his revelation.

Here the object is the world as God has made it and controls it; the norm is God's authoritative revelation; and the subject is the person

16. See Jim Fitzgerald, *Triplex: The Three Faces of Leadership* (available for Kindle by Amazon Digital Services, 2010).

who lives in the presence of God. Sense experience connects us with the world, but only if the self is able to make such connections governed by God's Word.

So the three aspects of knowledge correspond to the attributes of God's lordship. The object is the world as God's *control* has made it and maintained it. The norm is God's *authority* for human knowledge. And the subject is the knower, standing in the *presence* of God.

These three aspects of knowledge are perspectival. You can't have one without the others, and with each, you will have the others. Every item of true human knowledge is the application of God's authoritative norm to a fact of creation, by a person in God's image. Take away one of those, and there is no knowledge at all.

So I distinguish three perspectives of knowledge. In the *normative perspective*, we ask the question, "What do God's norms direct us to believe?" In the *situational perspective*, we ask, "What are the facts?" In the *existential perspective*, we ask, "What belief is most satisfying to a believing heart?" Given the view of knowledge outlined above, the answers to these three questions coincide. But it is sometimes useful to distinguish these questions so as to give us multiple angles of inquiry. Each question helps us to answer the others.

The normative perspective, therefore, contains all reality, for all reality is God's general revelation to us. Similarly, the situational contains all reality, our whole environment. And the existential perspective also contains everything, namely, all our experience.

In an important sense, then, the normative perspective includes the situational and existential. To think according to God's norms is to take every fact (situational) and every experience (existential) into account. It is also true that the situational perspective includes the normative (for norms are facts) and the existential (for experiences are facts). And the existential includes the normative and the situational, for the norms and facts are aspects of our experience.

What role, then, does the Bible play in our knowledge of God and of his world? As we have seen, the Bible is the covenant constitution of the people of God, the highest authority, which we may not question. Thus, it is natural to consider it part of the normative perspective. But it is also part

of our situation (the fact that illumines all other facts) and of our experience (the experience that illumines all others). So the Bible should not be identified with the normative perspective or vice versa. Each perspective includes everything, as we have seen. But the Bible is a particular fact that governs all perspectives and determines how we should use them.

Our *understanding* of the Bible is multiperspectival. To comprehend the Bible, we must understand it in its historical environment (situational) and we must understand its relevance to us today (situational and existential). But once we come to a prayerful, thoughtful, settled understanding of Scripture's teaching, that teaching must take precedence over knowledge from any other source.

Remember: the normative, situational, and existential perspectives are mutually dependent, and so relative to one another. So some critics of perspectivalism sometimes think that this approach makes the Bible relative to other forms of knowledge. But that is an error. The Bible is not the normative perspective (or the situational or the existential). It is a particular object within all three perspectives given to us by God to serve as the ultimate standard of human thought and life.¹⁷

Ethics

The same perspectives govern the quest for ethical knowledge, the knowledge of right and wrong.¹⁸ As secular epistemology has been divided along three lines corresponding with these perspectives, so secular ethics has been existential (basing ethical judgments on feelings), teleological (focusing on happiness), or deontological (focusing on duties). I see these as existential, situational, and normative, respectively. These fail in various ways to account for the nature of ethical decisions. One major problem is that most ethicists try to separate these three perspectives from one another.

A biblical ethic will include all three perspectives. Normatively, we seek to obey God's authoritative Word, his law. Situationally, we

17. The preceding section summarizes the epistemology expounded at greater length in *DKG*. I have also reformulated this material for the section on the knowledge of God in my *ST*.

18. I have discussed the ethical implications of the perspectives especially in chapters 3–4 of *DCL*, and in my short book *Perspectives on the Word of God*.

seek to apply that law to situations (which are themselves revelation of a sort—general revelation) so as to maximize divine blessing, the highest happiness. Existentially, we seek the inner satisfaction of living as God designed us to live, in his presence. These are perspectives. Each involves the others. But each serves as a check and balance against our misunderstandings of the others.

These perspectives are similar to the secular ethical approaches of deontologism (normative), teleologism-utilitarianism (situational), and subjectivism (existential). But while these secular methods are inconsistent with one another, the three Christian perspectives complement one another. If someone denies the biblical God, he has no reason to think that his norms (deontological), his goals (teleological), and his feelings (subjectivist) will cohere; so he must choose one over the other in case of conflict. But in Christian ethics, the divinely revealed norm fits our situation, because God has defined the norm and made the world to cohere with it. And he has made us in his image to live in the world he has made, under the norms he has determined.

Other Triads

Once you get started thinking this way, threefold distinctions may pop up regularly in your mind. One thinks of the distinction in theology between justification (normative), adoption (situational), and sanctification (existential); the image of God as physical, judicial, and moral (Meredith Kline in *Images of the Spirit*¹⁹); and so forth. In Appendix A of my *DG*, I mention thirty-six of these, some rather tongue-in-cheek, and in *SBL* and *STI* find such triads scattered through the whole corpus of Reformed systematic theology.

And in the exploration of the world, of natural revelation, there are also triads of interest. Vern Poythress's first book, *Philosophy, Science, and the Sovereignty of God*,²⁰ explores how Kenneth Pike's tagmemic linguistics relates to all this, such as the distinction between particle,

19. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980.

20. Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976. See also Poythress's more recent *In the Beginning Was the Word* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), which deals comprehensively with language and its relation to God.

wave, and field. The old philosophical distinction between self, world, and God (*God* here being understood as a divine revelation) is another familiar triad that ties in with our analysis.

Conclusions

How is perspectivalism useful? There are some moments when I think it is a kind of deep structure of the universe and of Bible truth. Other times (most times) I think of it more modestly, as a pedagogical device. Certainly, as a pedagogical device, it gives students some hooks on which to hang bits of theological knowledge—or, to change the metaphor, some string by which to tie things together. But I think it is of even more practical significance.

For one thing, I think it resolves a lot of traditional theological arguments, such as whether redemptive history (the situation) is more important than the divine law (normative) or believing subjectivity. You need each one to appreciate the others. That fact has implications for preaching, evangelism, and our personal appropriation of Scripture.

Second, it encourages us toward balance. Preaching that focuses all the time on law (normative) and not grace (situational) will be corrected by an understanding of the true relation between these, and vice versa. People who emphasize the objective (normative and situational) while disparaging human experience and feelings (existential) can be corrected by a multiperspectival understanding, and vice versa. Perspectivalism is a way of checking ourselves. If a pastor develops a ministry that focuses on norms and situations, he may need to supplement it with something that does justice to the existential perspective, and so on. If a congregation has a lot of prophetic gifts, but few kingly or priestly, perhaps it needs to seek leadership in the other two areas.

So I think that perspectivalism is an encouragement to the unity of the church. *Sometimes* our divisions of theology and practice are differences of perspective, of balance, rather than differences over the essentials of faith.²¹ So perspectivalism will help us better to appreciate one another, and to appreciate the diversity of God's work among us.

21. See my "Machen's Warrior Children," referenced earlier, and *Evangelical Reunion* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), also available at http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_books.htm. See also the essay "Reformed and Evangelicals Together" in the present volume.