Speaking the Truth in Love

The Theology of John M. Frame

Edited by

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In Memory of
Professor John Murray
1898–1975

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Backgrounds to My Thought

John M. Frame

I've been asked to list some people and writings that have influenced the distinctive ideas of my theology, apologetics, and ethics. But such a list will not mean anything to most readers unless I explain to some extent why and how these people and writings have influenced me.

First some general autobiography, overlapping what I say in *RLT*, included in this volume.

I was born in the Pittsburgh area in 1939. I received Christ as my personal Savior and Lord at around age thirteen, through the ministry of Beverly Heights, an evangelical congregation of the United Presbyterian Church of North America. This was about the time Billy Graham first visited Pittsburgh, where I lived. I went to one of his meetings, with the church youth group. Although I did not "go forward," some of my friends did, and I saw profound changes in their lives. I sensed my own sin and need for Christ and came to trust him.

The music ministry of the church also changed me profoundly. I took organ lessons there and sang in the choir. The youth ministry taught me the gospel; the music ministry drove it into my heart. From that time on, I have been deeply interested in worship.

My theological interests, too, began very soon after my conversion. Our youth leader, Bob Kelley, was not afraid to get us kids into some pretty heavy-

duty theology; he later became a professor of New Testament at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. Another professor there was Dr. John H. Gerstner, the same one who had such a deep influence on R. C. Sproul. Gerstner was a frequent speaker at our youth camps and rallies. He was a Socratic master teacher: I don't think I've completely forgotten anything I heard him say, or any of the thought processes he conjured up within me.

In high school years I also listened closely to a number of radio preachers, particularly Donald Grey Barnhouse of the *Bible Study Hour* and Peter Eldersveld of the *Back to God Hour*. Barnhouse was an evangelical pastor in the liberal Presbyterian denomination (PCUSA), rather dispensational in his theology. Eldersveld was a Dutch Calvinist from the Christian Reformed Church. Both had gifts for vivid language and persuasive argument. I hung on their every word.

Princeton University, 1957–61

At Princeton University, the main influences on me were my teachers on the one hand and the Princeton Evangelical Fellowship (PEF) on the other. The PEF was just about the only evangelical group on campus at the time. Through its ministry (and that of Westerly Road Church) I grew spiritually as at no other time in my life. My knowledge of the Bible went to a deeper level at PEF under the teaching of Dr. Donald Fullerton.[1] Both PEF and Beverly Heights encouraged me to memorize Scripture. I learned some seven hundred verses through the Navigators' Topical Memory System, and those are the verses that continue today to serve as landmarks for my theology.

PEF was dispensational in its viewpoint, as Barnhouse was, but Gerstner thought dispensationalism was an awful heresy. I never accepted the dispensational system, but neither could I accept Gerstner's harshly negative verdict about it. My friends at PEF were godly people who loved Jesus and the Word. We prayed together every day and visited dorm rooms to bring the gospel to fellow students. Princeton was a spiritual battleground, and the PEF folks were my fellow soldiers. Struggling together for Jesus against opposition tends to magnify the unity of believers and to decrease the importance of disagreement. Surely Jesus intended for his

1. For more reflections on this period in my life, see "Remembering Donald B. Fullerton," http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/Remembering_fullerton.htm.

people to wage this battle together, not separated into different denominations and theological factions. My experience with PEF (and earlier with Graham) prevented me from ever being anti-evangelical, as are many of my Reformed friends. At Princeton, I became an ecumenist.

I majored in philosophy and also took courses in religion, literature, and history. The religion courses, together with the denominational campus ministries, gave me my first introduction to theological liberalism. Although I had toyed with similar ideas during my high school years, I sharply rebelled against liberalism in college. Princeton liberalism was casual religion: no authoritative Bible, no passion for souls, no desire for holiness, no vitality. Indeed, the Christ of Scripture simply wasn't there. Later, I read J. Gresham Machen's *Christianity and Liberalism*,[2] which argued that liberalism was an entirely different religion from Christianity, and I found it entirely persuasive. Although liberalism has changed its face in the years since, I still see it as the opposite of the biblical gospel.

PEF taught me the importance of holding firmly to the supreme authority (including infallibility and inerrancy) of Scripture as God's Word, over against liberal religion. I have never abandoned that foundation, and it has played a major role in my teaching. In PEF, further, one could never argue a theological position without appealing directly to Scripture. Although this approach is sometimes derided as "proof-texting," I believe that rightly used, it constitutes the only sound theological method, and this has been a major emphasis in my work through my life. In this regard, see especially my article *IDSCB*.

My philosophy teachers, for the most part, did not profess to be Christians at all, liberal or otherwise. Walter Kaufmann, who had recently published his *Critique of Religion and Philosophy*,[3] was an expert on Friedrich Nietzsche and himself a very Nietzschean thinker, who did his best to destroy his students' Christian beliefs. His anti-Christian arguments didn't bother me much, by the grace of God. But I greatly enjoyed Kaufmann's brilliant intellect, clarity, and wit. His writings influenced my own writing style. (Over the years, I have had to temper the polemic edge of that style.) And like me, he had no sympathy with liberal theology. He attacked both conservative and liberal Christianity with equal zest, even presenting a persuasive critique

2. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1923.
3. New York: Harper, 1958.

of the liberal "documentary hypothesis," which divided the Pentateuch into works of many different authors.

Other philosophy teachers gave me a good introduction to the history of philosophy, particularly Gregory Vlastos in Greek and medieval philosophy and George Pitcher in the modern period. I also studied with Ledger Wood, who revised and updated Frank Thilly's widely used *A History of Philosophy*.[4] But in general, the Princeton philosophers took a negative approach to their discipline's history. For them, the history of philosophy was largely a history of error. When we studied Plato, the important thing was to see all the mistakes Plato had made, not to value his vision. Same with other philosophers. This negativism can be understood partly from the fact that Princeton's philosophy department was one of the last to abandon logical positivism. Carl Hempel, the positivist of the Berlin school, taught logic and philosophy of science and, like other positivists, despised metaphysics, which had been such a central concern of the philosophic tradition.

Yet I did take a course in metaphysics at Princeton. It was the last one ever taught in that era: shortly afterward, the department voted to never again list a course with the word *metaphysics* in it. But the course I took from G. Dennis O'Brien had a large impact on my thinking. O'Brien was a young Roman Catholic (although Kaufmann said he could not vouch for O'Brien's orthodoxy). He had studied at the University of Chicago and valued the "classical realism" of Richard McKeon and John Wild.

In the metaphysics course, we studied Aristotle, Spinoza, and John Dewey, three philosophers of very different eras, with very different-looking metaphysical systems. O'Brien rejected the find-the-mistakes approach of his colleagues. When he taught Aristotle, one would have assumed that he was Aristotelian. But when he taught Spinoza, he seemed Spinozist, and when he taught Dewey, Deweyan. His general point was that if you started where Aristotle started, understanding his inheritance from his predecessors, understanding the questions he tried to answer, using the conceptual equipment available to him, thinking with the same intellectual gifts Aristotle enjoyed, you would probably come to the same conclusions he did. For O'Brien, the same could be said of Spinoza and of Dewey.

Aristotle described the world as a collection of things, Spinoza of facts, Dewey of processes; but these, to O'Brien, were not so much factual differences as differences in the philosopher's "way with the facts." Metaphysics in

4. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1951.

general, he thought, was not a discovery of new facts, but rather it explored "ways with the facts."[5] Although O'Brien didn't use this terminology, what I took from his analysis was that Aristotle, Spinoza, and Dewey looked at the world from three "perspectives," as if viewing from three different angles.

I didn't entirely agree with this approach, and still do not. I think there are such things as "metaphysical facts," and I believe that many disagreements in metaphysics are precisely factual disagreements. But O'Brien's course was stimulating to me as few other courses have been. I was convinced that alongside other differences among philosophers (including factual differences), there were also "perspectival" differences. That is to say, not all the differences between thinkers are differences between truth and falsity, right and wrong; factual disagreements; or differences between clear thinking and "mistakes." Some are also differences in perspective, looking at the same truth from different angles. That was the beginning of my inclination to understand reality "perspectivally."

So when I graduated from Princeton, I was biblically oriented (almost biblicistic, but I think in a good way), antiliberal, ecumenical, and incipiently perspectivalist.

Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia), 1961–64

At Westminster, I studied largely with the "old faculty" that had taught there from the 1930s: Cornelius Van Til, John Murray, Ned Stonehouse, Paul Woolley, and Edward J. Young, plus some gifted younger men, such as Edmund Clowney and Meredith G. Kline.

I had begun to read Van Til in college, seeking help in dealing with the philosophical problems I encountered at Princeton. I had earlier read C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*,[6] *The Problem of Pain*,[7] and *Miracles*.[8] Van Til was very critical of Lewis, but Lewis actually prepared me for Van Til. The *Miracles* book was especially helpful to me. There, Lewis showed that naturalism and Christianity were two distinct and incompatible worldviews, and that

5. One humorist in the class proposed the following essay question for the final exam: "Distinguish between 'a way with the facts' and 'away with the facts!' "

6. New York: Harper, 2001.

7. New York: Macmillan, 1957.

8. New York: Macmillan, 1947.

arguments against miracles typically assume that naturalism is true. Lewis seemed to me to be entirely right, and that readied me to believe Van Til's assertion that the Christian faith is a worldview unto itself, with its own distinctive metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. Lewis also prepared me to accept Van Til's view that opposition to Christianity is not based fundamentally on factual discovery, but rather on presuppositions that rule out Christianity from the outset of the discussion.

Van Til became the greatest influence on my apologetics and theology. In my view, although I have been subjected to some derision for saying this, Van Til was the most important Christian thinker since John Calvin. His message is precisely what people of our time need most to hear: that the lordship of Jesus Christ must govern our thoughts (2 Cor. 10:5) as well as every other area of life. Every problem of theology, apologetics, biblical studies, science, and philosophy takes on a very different appearance when we reject non-Christian presuppositions and seek to think consistently according to Christian ones. Certainly, nobody who has not spent time with Van Til can understand well what I am about.[9]

I was interested in Van Til not only for his presuppositional epistemology and apologetic, but also for ideas of his that are less well known. In my *Van Til the Theologian*[10] booklet and in my larger book *CVT*, I discuss Van Til as a theologian, particularly his understanding of theological method. I took an interest, for example, in his threefold understanding of revelation in his *Introduction to Systematic Theology*:[11] revelation from God, nature, and man. He subdivided these, in turn, into various permutations: revelation from God about God, from God about nature, from God about man, from nature about God, etc. He also developed his ethics in accord with another threefold distinction found in the Westminster Confession of Faith: every ethical decision may be evaluated according to its goal, motive, and standard.[12] He denied that these topics must be taken up in any particular order, for he believed that each implied the others.

O'Brien had led me to think in terms of "perspectives." My Christian adaptation of O'Brien, under Van Til's tutelage, was that perspectivalism was

9. See especially the titles of Van Til on my "Recommended Resources" list in this volume.

10. Phillipsburg, NJ: Pilgrim Publishing, 1976; also available at http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/1976VanTil.htm.

11. Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974, 64–109.

12. Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Theistic Ethics* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), 1–6. Cf. WCF 16.7.

necessary, since unlike God we are finite beings. We cannot see everything at once, as God does. So we must investigate things, first from this angle, then from that. But Van Til took me a step further: from a general perspectivalism to what would be called *tri*perspectivalism, to a set of threefold distinctions that are especially important for our reflection. Nature, man, and God; goal, motive, and standard.

Edmund Clowney reinforced this triadic perspective. In his course on the doctrine of the church, he produced an impressive pyramid diagram. The pyramid's base was divided into two intersecting triads, one listing the church's ministries, the other the church's leadership. The ministries were worship, edification, and witness. The offices of the church provided leadership in teaching, rule, and mercy. The diagram also distinguished "general" officers from "special," by bifurcating the triangle into an upper and a lower section. All Christians hold the "general" office as teachers, rulers, and givers of mercy. But there are also specially ordained people who have particular responsibilities in these areas: teaching elders, ruling elders, and deacons. Above the pyramid, with a space between him and the rest of the pyramid, was Jesus Christ, the head of the church, who embodies the ultimate in all the offices, the supreme Prophet, Priest, and King.[13]

My triperspectivalism began to bring together Van Til's triads, Clowney's triads, and some others into a general overview. When I later began teaching at Westminster, I taught the doctrine of God, organizing the material under the general headings of God's *transcendence* and *immanence*, following a common pattern in theology. But I became uneasy with this approach, coming to sense that *transcendence* was an ambiguous idea. Does it mean that God is so far from us as to be "wholly other" (Otto, Barth)? If so, how can he also be immanent? It occurred to me that biblically it would make more sense to define *transcendence* in terms of God's kingship or lordship: God is not infinitely removed from us in Scripture; rather, he *rules* us. My studies in divine lordship yielded an emphasis on God's *control*, *authority*, and *covenant presence*, which I came to call his *lordship attributes*. When Scripture talks about God's being "high" and "lifted up," it is not referring to some kind of wholly-otherness, but to God's kingly control and authority over his own domain. So why not define *transcendence* in those terms? And then *immanence* can refer to his covenant presence, his determination to be "with" his people, *Immanuel*.

13. See Edmund Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995).

Then (since I also taught ethics) I came to see that this threefold scheme correlated with Van Til's "goal, motive, standard." God's *control* was his lordship over nature and history, so that they conspired always to achieve the *goal* of God's glory. His *authority* was the *standard* for the behavior of his creatures. And his redemptive *presence*, in the hearts of his people, creates in them the *motives* necessary for good works.

This threefold understanding also applied to the doctrine of revelation and Scripture, which I also taught in my early years. As Van Til said, there is revelation from God, nature, and man *about* God, nature, and man. Nature is, of course, under God's *control*. But God also comes in person (and in his written Word) to speak to us with *authority*. Further, he reveals himself in human beings, his image, which is to say that God's revelation is *present* in us as well as outside us.

I came to believe that the ultimate root of these triads was the triune character of God. He is the Father, who develops an *authoritative* plan; the Son, who carries out that plan by his powerful *control* of all things; and the Spirit, who as the *presence* of God applies that plan to nature, history, and human beings.

This narrative has gone beyond my Westminster student years, but I need to return there to mention some other influences. One important influence was certainly Meredith G. Kline, who made exciting discoveries about the nature of biblical covenants. In my later teaching and writing, I made much use of Kline's idea that covenants were essentially *treaties* between the great King Yahweh and the "vassal" people that he has called to be his. As Kline showed, these treaties took written form, and their literary structure was somewhat constant: the name of the great King, the historical description of his past blessings to the vassal, the stipulations or laws of the covenant, and the sanctions: the blessings for obedience and the curses for disobedience. In the triad of history, law, sanctions, I found another application of my triperspectivalism. The history describes God's powerful *control* over nature and history; the law pronounces his *authoritative* requirements; the sanctions show that he is not an absentee Lord, but is *present* to show mercy to and discipline his people.

Kline identifies Scripture as God's treaty document in his *The Structure of Biblical Authority*,[14] a book that I have used again and again in my own teaching and writing. I think it is the first real theological breakthrough

14. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972.

since B. B. Warfield on the nature of the Bible. The treaty is authored by the great King, is holy (placed in the sanctuary), and has supreme authority for the vassal. In this study, Kline shows that God intends to rule his people by a book.

But I also received much help from other Westminster professors in maintaining a strong doctrine of Scripture. Edward J. Young's *Thy Word Is Truth*[15] was a great help in showing me the biblical rationale for the doctrine of inerrancy. Indeed, every course I took at Westminster in some way reinforced the truth of the authority of Scripture. Edmund Clowney showed us that the primacy of God's Word could be found on nearly every page of Scripture. Van Til, in *The Protestant Doctrine of Scripture*[16] and in *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, presented biblical authority as inevitable, in terms of a Christian philosophy. And John Murray's wonderful article "The Attestation of Scripture"[17] and his *Calvin on Scripture and Divine Sovereignty*[18] summarized the issues masterfully.

I should say something more about John Murray. It was common in those days for students to say that they had come to Westminster for Van Til but that they stayed for Murray. Murray was not well known outside Reformed circles, but as a theologian he was peerless. Murray, Clowney, and Van Til are the authors I refer to most often today. Murray's *Collected Writings*[19] are a wonderful treasury of exegesis and theological reflection. The present-day criticism of Murray in Reformed circles is in my judgment unworthy of him.

What I learned best from Murray was his theological method. At Princeton, my PEF friends urged me not to study at Westminster. In their view, Reformed theology was more a celebration of its own tradition than a serious reading of Scripture. When I came to Westminster, I was armed by this criticism. If Westminster had defended its teaching mainly by referring to its confessions and past thinkers, I would not have been persuaded. But Murray focused on Scripture itself. His classes were almost entirely spent in exegeting the main biblical sources on each topic. In this, he was not afraid

15. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957.

16. Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1967.

17. In Ned Stonehouse and Paul Woolley, eds., *The Infallible Word* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1946), 1–54. This volume contains essays by many Westminster professors, which were and are very helpful.

18. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960.

19. 4 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982).

to differ from Reformed tradition, even the confessions, when he believed the biblical text pointed in a different direction. He described his method in his essay "Systematic Theology,"[20] which I have read again and again, and on which every young theologian should deeply meditate. Here he condemns traditionalism and advocates a concentration on biblical exegesis.

My own theology is very unlike Murray's in style, diction, and emphasis. But in its method and most of its conclusions, my work is more like his than any other theological writer's.

I was more ambivalent to the large emphasis at Westminster on redemptive history or biblical theology. A number of the professors had been deeply influenced by Geerhardus Vos, professor of biblical theology at Princeton Seminary. Edmund Clowney, although he had not studied with Vos, was also enthusiastic about Vos's ideas and taught students to focus their sermons on the redemptive-historical significance of each text. This meant that biblical texts were intended to proclaim redemption in Christ (the Old Testament looking forward to him, the New Testament reflecting on his incarnation, atonement, resurrection, and ascension). Sermons, on this view, should also focus on redemption and not on, say, the moral successes or failures of biblical characters. Sermons that used biblical characters to illustrate spiritual or moral issues were called "exemplarist" or "moralistic."

I, too, was impressed by the importance of redemptive history, and to this day I benefit most from sermons that have that focus, which is, in the end, a focus on Christ. Clowney was one of my very favorite preachers. In some circles, however, this emphasis has become divisive and sectarian. Churches have been divided by extreme advocates of redemptive history who say that one must never, ever use a biblical character as a moral example, and who bend texts in bizarre ways to make them "point to Christ." I think this extreme form of the movement has been harmful. The extreme polemic against "exemplarism" is misplaced. Scripture does, in fact, point to characters in its narrative as positive and negative examples (Matt. 12:3–8; 1 Cor. 11:1; Heb. 11; 12:16), and Scripture strongly emphasizes godly examples as an aid to spiritual growth (1 Tim. 4:12; cf. 3:1–13). This is not opposed to the centrality of Christ. In the Bible, Christ is Redeemer, but he is also the supreme example of holy living (Phil. 2:1–11; 1 Peter 2:21; 4:1; 1 John 3:16). So Westminster's emphasis on redemptive history was a stimulus to my

20. *Collected Writings*, 4:1–21.

thinking, but my experience there led me to oppose redemptive-historical extremism.[21]

I should also mention another major influence on my thought from this period, although from one who was not on the Westminster faculty: Francis Schaeffer. I met Schaeffer only three or four times in my life. I spent a night at his chalet in Switzerland in 1960, but he was away in the States at the time. I hoped to spend more time there, but God never opened the door. Nevertheless, reports of God's work at L'Abri stirred my soul, and I sought any opportunity to read Schaeffer's letters and, when later available, his books.

Early in my study at Westminster, I read Schaeffer's article "A Review of a Review," published in *The Bible Today*.[22] Schaeffer had studied both with Van Til and with the editor of *The Bible Today*, J. Oliver Buswell. Buswell had been very critical of Van Til. Schaeffer's article sought to bring them closer together. Much of Schaeffer's argument made sense to me, and from then on I believed that the differences between Van Til's and the "traditional" apologetic were somewhat less than Van Til understood them to be.

Even more impressive to me, however, was Schaeffer's example as an evangelist. L'Abri sought both to give "honest answers to honest questions" to the people who visited and to show them an example of radical Christian love and hospitality, a "demonstration that God is real." I came to know many who had been converted through L'Abri, or had been deeply influenced by the ministry. Almost without exception, these believers were spiritually mature, balanced, passionate about both truth and holiness. Although I watched L'Abri from afar off, it influenced my own ministry more than many who were closer by.

I also thought much during my student years about the process of theological education itself. Westminster education was very academic. The seminary sought to draw a very sharp line between academy and church, to the point that many students (more radical than their professors, of course) thought it was inappropriate to have chapel exercises or prayer meetings on campus. I reacted sharply against this kind of thinking. It seemed to me that there was no biblical reason to think that training for the ministry should

21. See *DCL*, 271–97; also "Some Journal Entries on Preaching," http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/1999Journal.htm.

22. *The Bible Today* (October 1948): 7–9; also available at http://www.pcahistory.org/documents/schaefferreview.html.

be apart from the church, much reason to think that such training should be saturated with the means of grace. Many at Westminster said that it was wrong to "separate" the Christian life from Christian doctrine. But as I've often noted, *separate* is an ambiguous term. What this phrase sometimes meant at Westminster was that if you got the doctrines right, spiritual growth was the inevitable outcome. Yet both Scripture and my own experience invalidated that judgment.

So some years later (1972) I wrote "Proposal for a New Seminary,"[23] which argued that theological education should be first of all a practical field education within the church with academic supplements as needed (rather the opposite of the current model). This Proposal humbled me: I saw that I would not have been fit to be a teacher in such a seminary. Later, I argued that there was also benefit to be found in the traditional model (in which I have, in fact, participated through my life).[24] But my Proposal remains my ideal.

My student years at Westminster were deeply formative. Particularly, I emerged fully convinced of biblical authority and presuppositional epistemology, modified a bit in Schaeffer's direction, ambivalent toward the redemptive-historical emphasis, somewhat biblicistic in my theological method, and inclined to a perspectival understanding of biblical concepts and theological issues. I believed that theological education was truly a ministry of the church, using all the means of God's grace. So I sought to speak the truth in love.

Yale University, 1964–68

I went to Yale for graduate study in philosophical theology. I earned both an MA and an MPhil there, but, alas, I did not finish my dissertation for the PhD.

The program allowed me to take courses both in philosophy and in religion-theology. In philosophy, I took courses from Paul Weiss, who modified Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy; from William Christian, who tried to schematize the language of religion; and from H. D. Lewis, a defender of libertarian free will. I did not accept Lewis's arguments, but I still

23. *Journal of Pastoral Practice* 2, 1 (Winter 1978): 10–17; also available at http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/1978Proposal.htm.

24. "Learning at Jesus' Feet," http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/2003Learning.htm.

consider his philosophical formulations of libertarianism to be definitive.[25] I also served as a teaching assistant to John Wild, who by then had abandoned "classical realism" in favor of a form of existential philosophy.

In theology, I studied with the brilliant young David Kelsey (who raised the question of how Scripture should be *used* as an authority),[26] theologian of culture Julian Hartt, and George Lindbeck,[27] now known as the father of postliberalism.[28] I took courses from Lindbeck on Aquinas and Tillich, but the one that affected me most was a course I audited on comparative dogmatics. Here he urged a perspectival approach to the different confessional traditions. He described himself as "on the conservative wing of the avant-garde of the ecumenical movement." By "avant-garde" he meant that he was serious about breaking down barriers between different traditions. By "conservative" he meant that he took these differences themselves seriously: he wanted to reconcile the traditions, not dismantle them. As O'Brien had managed to reconcile Aristotle, Spinoza, and Dewey by analyzing their questions in their intellectual context, so in a similar way Lindbeck sought to reconcile the various theological traditions. He recommended to us, for example, Stephen Pfurtner's *Luther and Aquinas on Salvation*,[29] which presents even the deep divide over justification in a perspectival way. I was not convinced, yet I was challenged not to take the traditional interdenominational arguments at face value, but to see if I could find ways in which the parties could look at one another more sympathetically. My ecumenism and my perspectivalism were drawing together.

Another major influence on my thinking at Yale was Paul Holmer,[30] my thesis adviser. Holmer had been raised an evangelical and had come

25. See, for example, his *Our Experience of God* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1959), and *Freedom and History* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1962). For my view of libertarianism, see my *DG*, 135–45, and *NOG*, 119–31.

26. See my review of his *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*, in *WTJ* 39, 2 (Spring 1977): 328–53; also available at http://www.frame-poythress.org.

27. See my review of his *The Nature of Theology* in *The Presbyterian Journal* 43 (February 27, 1985): 11–12; also Appendix H to my *DKG*.

28. Hans Frei, one of the main figures of "narrative theology," also taught at Yale at the time, but I did not take courses from him. His graduate courses at the time dealt with nineteenth-century German thinkers and required students to read them in German. Although I knew some German, I did not want to spend time in this type of course, even for the great benefit of studying with Frei.

29. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964.

30. See my review of Holmer's *The Grammar of Faith*, in *WTJ* 42, 1 (Fall 1979): 219–31; also available at http://www.frame-poythress.org.

back to the evangelical faith after some time as what he called a "positivist." His theological heroes were Martin Luther and Søren Kierkegaard, and his philosophic hero Ludwig Wittgenstein. I had read both Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein at Princeton, but it was Holmer who got me excited about them. Although Kierkegaard still fascinates me, the scholarly debates on how to interpret him have left me frustrated, and I have not made much use of him in my own thinking. Wittgenstein, however, is a thinker I often turn back to. His view that meaning is, in most cases, its *use* in the language certainly influenced my own view that "theology is application," although I have been very careful to distinguish my general position from Wittgenstein's. For other uses of Wittgenstein in my work, see his entry in the name index of my *DKG*.

In brief, I left Yale thinking more deeply about Scripture and perspectivalism, strongly opposed to libertarianism, and persuaded that theology is the use of biblical language for the edification of people. My basic convictions about the authority of Scripture and the presuppositional nature of thought held firm, despite challenges by respected thinkers.

Back to Westminster, 1968–80

At Norman Shepherd's invitation, I returned to Westminster to teach systematic theology. Cornelius Van Til then asked me if I would also teach some courses in the apologetics department, and by 1976 the administration had added "apologetics" to my title. My required courses were in the doctrine of Scripture, the doctrine of God, apologetics, and ethics. All of these involved reflection on epistemology, so that field also consumed much of my study. With the later addition of worship, these were the subjects on which I have done most of my writing over the course of my life.

As a teacher at Westminster, I sought to formulate and communicate the thinking I had previously developed, but my theology did not remain static. I continued to be influenced by people and literature.

Sometimes I was influenced by my own students. When I arrived, many students at Westminster were disciples of the Dutch Calvinistic philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd. These students tended to be pretty arrogant, arguing that the traditional Reformed theology that Westminster represented was "dualist," "scholastic," and so on. Eventually I found myself at odds with them and their ideology. I was particularly concerned about their doctrine

of revelation, in which the authority of Scripture was limited to the "realm of faith" and our main guidance for life was to be found, not in Scripture at all, but rather in the "word of creation," i.e., natural revelation understood through the lens of Dooyeweerd's philosophy. The Bibliography in this volume contains a number of titles arising out of this controversy, particularly my booklet *TAP*.

Although I opposed the Dooyeweerdian movement, it motivated me to rethink some things. Particularly, I had to learn how to give some account of the place of Scripture in relation to general revelation, Christ as the Word of God, and the various unwritten media by which the Word of God comes to us. I found help in Van Til's triads, nature, man, and God, which contributed to my own triperspectivalism.

Also contributing much to triperspectivalism was Vern Poythress, who studied at Westminster in the early 1970s. Poythress took a great interest in my work, and my student soon became my teacher. Poythress had studied with Kenneth Pike, the famous linguist who taught many of the Wycliffe Bible Translators. Pike had developed what Vern described as triperspectival distinctions within linguistics: particle, wave, and field. Poythress was and is very brilliant, and he stimulated me to see dimensions to my triperspectival ideas that I could not have thought of myself. His support convinced me that God had led us into some important insights, and Vern has ever since been a friend and theological partner. See especially his *Symphonic Theology*,[31] but his many other books also articulate our joint vision. For many books and articles he has written, see our joint Web site, http://www.frame-poythress.org.

In a different way, Norman Shepherd was influential in my thinking and life. Norman had graduated from Westminster by the time I arrived as a student, but even in his absence he was well known on campus. My fellow students often referred to him as the likely successor to John Murray. Both men were brilliant and were exclusive psalm singers. Shepherd lacked Murray's Scottish brogue, but his style of lecturing, his choice of words, and even his mannerisms were very similar to Murray's.

When Ned Stonehouse died in 1962, Shepherd was asked to teach Stonehouse's former course in New Testament biblical theology. Shepherd's major field was systematic theology, not New Testament, but we students were in awe of him. Given little advance notice in teaching the course, he

31. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987; also available at http://www.frame-poythress.org.

worked hard to stay ahead of the class. We saw him every day, sitting at a library table, surrounded by books and notes. I put in a special effort to understand his material, out of respect for his hard work and excellent presentation. Perhaps I worked too hard, because my mind went blank during the final exam. I was given one of the lower grades that I received as a seminary student.

In the mid-1960s, Shepherd was called to work alongside Murray in systematics, and then, when Murray retired, Shepherd taught all the systematics courses for one year. He wrote to me at Yale to see whether I would be interested in helping him out, and of course I was, although I was surprised that he would call on one who had made a mere B+ in his New Testament biblical theology course. I got to know him fairly well in those days; we attended the same church as well as participating together in the seminary program. Even as a colleague, I was still in awe of him. His understanding of the Scriptures and the Reformed tradition far exceeded mine.

Shepherd was the last person that I (or anyone else) would have expected to create doctrinal controversy. He was so like Murray, and Murray had virtually defined Reformed orthodoxy for the rest of us. But in 1974 Shepherd was challenged on his view of justification and continues today to be a figure of controversy.[32] Today I don't think I can fairly be called a "Shepherdite" in terms of that controversy. But I learned a huge amount of theology from Shepherd. I audited two of his courses just for my own personal edification, and I continue to be edified by what I learned there. Shepherd remains for me a model of careful, precise, responsible theological scholarship and doctrinal formulation. Like Murray, he always puts Scripture ahead of tradition, and in that respect he remains a model for me.

Another colleague who influenced me profoundly was C. John Miller, who taught practical theology. Although "Jack," as we called him, was an able scholar, his heart was in evangelism and church planting. He founded New Life Church, which rapidly became a megachurch, the World Harvest Mission, and the Sonship ministry, a ministry of conferences and tapes that articulate Miller's vision of gospel-centered Christian living.[33] I greatly admired Jack's evangelistic boldness and humble spirit. On a number of occasions, he invited me to accompany him on evangelistic projects. I

32. For my response to his view of justification, see my *RLT* in this volume. For Shepherd's position, see his book *The Call of Grace* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2000).

33. For my evaluation of Sonship, see my *RLT* in this volume.

declined, citing other business; but I regret now that I didn't make time to be with Jack at those times. I think that would have made me a better Christian and theologian.

I suppose that Jack's greatest influence on me was to make me willing to endure the scorn of traditionalists in the church. Jack's emphasis on evangelism led him to employ a style of worship at New Life that was far from the Presbyterian tradition. He used contemporary songs, guitars, cultivated informality. Many in our circles balked at this, even ridiculed it. But people came to Christ by God's grace, overcame besetting sins, became zealous for Christ. Eventually, many who had at first mocked New Life became enthusiastic members.

When I moved to California, we planted "New Life Presbyterian Church in Escondido," patterned in many ways after New Life in Philadelphia. The pastor was Dick Kaufmann, who had been a ruling elder at New Life in Philadelphia. We hoped to reach the unchurched, rather than merely to attract Reformed people. (Had we adopted the latter policy and succeeded, we would have added another division to a rather small Reformed community.) I was the elder in charge of worship, and I taught adults a class on worship, which led to my book *WST*. I was also asked to reply to letters we received that were critical of our worship, and that correspondence led to my book *CWM*. So I cite Jack Miller as a major inspiration for my work in this area. His books, especially *Outgrowing the Ingrown Church*,[34] defined for me what life in the church should be like, and Dick Kaufmann, my pastor for fourteen years, defined for me the model of a godly pastor. Miller and Kaufmann had a very broad influence on my thinking in many areas. Their attitude of love and grace to believer and unbeliever, friend and enemy alike rebuked my pride and spiritual complacency.

In my years of teaching in Philadelphia, I also had a good relationship with my colleague Jay E. Adams, who developed a new approach to pastoral counseling that was known as "nouthetic" or "biblical" counseling. Jay has been very supportive and encouraging to me over the years. Later we were also colleagues at Westminster in California.

He wrote many books on nouthetic counseling, but the basic exposition of his position was *Competent to Counsel*.[35] I have waxed hot and cold on this approach through the years. Since counseling is not my field, I have not

34. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986.
35. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970.

had to take a final position on it, and I'm glad of that. On the positive side, Adams's counseling method is presuppositional and semi-biblicistic in the way that I am. I love it when people search the Scriptures to find what the Bible says on a subject of importance. On the other hand, Adams has been criticized for not making sufficient use of general revelation, and therefore for his almost entirely negative view of secular psychology. That criticism rings a bell with me, too, because for all my biblicism I do believe it is important to understand extrabiblical truth, if only to accurately apply the Bible to a situation. (This is what I call the "situational perspective.") Practically, I've seen nouthetic counselors, by God's grace, help people solve many serious problems in their lives. But I've also seen some nouthetic counselors who have not listened hard enough to their counselees, who have ignored important situational factors, and who have therefore brought harm. I think the younger generation of nouthetic counselors, such as David Powlison and Ed Welch, have found a better balance here.

Another student during the Philadelphia years who led me to rethink some things was Greg Bahnsen. He was a disciple of Van Til and Rousas Rushdoony and became the leading formulator and defender of theonomy, the view that Old Testament civil law must be followed by modern civil governments, particularly that the penalties of crimes laid out in the Old Testament are norms for contemporary penology.[36] Bahnsen was a friend until his untimely death in 1995 from the complications of heart surgery, although our friendship did have some ups and downs. I never became a theonomist, but theonomy was a major motivation in my attempt to think through the implications of the law of Moses for today, as in my *DCL*. Vern Poythress's *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses*,[37] in my view, gives the best answers to the questions raised by theonomy, and I consult it regularly.

Westminster in California, 1980–2000

I moved to California in 1980 to help establish a new campus for Westminster. Other founders and early teachers were Robert Strimple, Allen Mawhinney, Dennis Johnson, Jay Adams, Robert Godfrey, Derke Bergsma, and Meredith Kline. We went with a missionary vision, for California had

36. See his *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977).

37. Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991; also available at http://www.frame-poythress.org/Poythress_books/Shadow/bl0.html.

very few Reformed churches, and we were probably the only Reformed seminary west of the Mississippi. The excitement of those early years (along with the planting of New Life Church, as I described it earlier) stirred me. There was a wonderful collegiality among the early faculty and students, despite some theological diversity.

My ecumenical vision was tested in the mid-1980s, when the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (of which New Life was a congregation) declined to join the Presbyterian Church in America, in my opinion for quite inadequate reasons. In 1989, New Life, and I with the church, left the OP denomination for the PCA. Jack Miller and the New Life Church in Philadelphia made the same decision. My *ER* was motivated by these events and summarized my thinking about them. In this context I came to see that denominationalism itself was unbiblical, and the book dealt with that broader issue.

By the 1990s, things at the seminary had also deteriorated, from my point of view. Differences that had been tolerable in the 1980s became matters of contention and faction in the 1990s. Among these were redemptive history, worship style, the regulative principle of worship, and the place of confessions. Some new faculty made the situation worse, in my opinion. I came to see that factionalism itself as a major evil, both in the churches and in the seminary. This situation influenced my writing thereafter.

My colleague Meredith Kline also became something of a negative influence on me during this period. I mentioned that during my student years at Westminster Seminary, Kline was one of my heroes. He stood for the Bible against Reformed traditionalism and taught me how theology could be wonderfully creative within the bounds of orthodoxy. But in later years, Kline developed a degree of rigidity and dogmatism that surprised and disappointed me. Perhaps his conflicts with theonomy and with Norman Shepherd in the 1970s had marked the turning point. I thought his review of Bahnsen's *Theonomy*[38] was over the top, as we say. And in his response to Shepherd, Kline seemed to be saying that one could not be orthodox unless one adhered to Kline's distinctive (and sometimes innovative) positions on the covenant of works and the culture/cult distinction.

Even though I disagreed with Kline, I was happy that he was willing to join us at Westminster in California, for I thought he was still the most brilliant biblical theologian in the Reformed community, and he was the

38. "Comments on an Old-New Error," *WTJ* (1978–79): 172–89; also available at http://www.covopc.org/Kline/Kline_on_Theonomy.html.

one who, more than anyone else, could get students excited about biblical theology. In retrospect, however, I see Kline as a divisive figure at the California campus. In the mid-1980s, he wrote letters to colleagues, attacking my apologetics as insufficiently Van Tillian. Those letters raised issues that I had already answered a number of times, and they showed an inadequate grasp of what I was trying to say. I thought that perhaps he had turned against me because he thought I was too close to Bahnsen and to Shepherd. The administration and faculty treated Kline's letters with "benign neglect." But in later years, Kline pressed with students the argument that one must accept his distinctives to be truly Reformed. Whether explicitly or not, intentionally or not, he thereby condemned my thinking as non-Reformed, and many students drew that inference. I tried to counter this in ways consistent with my continuing deep respect for Kline. But Kline proved to be more persuasive to the students than I was, to the effect that I became increasingly isolated. That, and a great many other problems, led to my resignation from Westminster and joining the faculty of Reformed Theological Seminary (RTS) in Orlando in 2000.

I mention this now only to indicate that although I mourned Kline's death in 2007, his work is now to me both a positive and a negative influence. I still revere him as a brilliant and devoted servant of Christ, and I make liberal use of his early studies in suzerainty treaties and divine lordship. But I argue against much of his later work, particularly his distinction between cult and culture, which leads to sharp distinctions between sacred and secular and between church and culture—sort of like Luther's "two kingdoms." This is a fairly pervasive theme of my *DCL*. Not only do I believe this teaching is wrong, but, as maintained by Kline himself and by many of his followers, I consider it divisive to the church. Even if this teaching were true, it would not be suitable as a test of Reformed orthodoxy, if only because it is not required by the Reformed confessional standards.

Another major division at Westminster in California was between those who saw theology as primarily a republication of Reformed confessions and traditions and those who saw it, as I did, as an application of Scripture to human life in the present. The traditionalist emphasis seemed to me to encourage ministries to be inward-facing rather than outward, to deemphasize evangelism and social action, and to emphasize denominational distinctives. As I interpret the situation, traditionalism came to prevail at Westminster in California. And for questioning it, I myself was considered less than truly Reformed. So I had

to move on. The separation between me and the seminary to which I had given twenty years was traumatic to me. I had seen not only the theological error of traditionalism (which John Murray had taught me) but also the practical effects of it in the Christian community. So this conflict (and a number of similar ones that occurred through my life) influenced me to see traditionalism as an error to be opposed. I refer to it often in my writings.[39]

Reformed Theological Seminary, 2000–Present

After the trouble at Westminster Seminary in California, my move to RTS Orlando was like dying and going to heaven. I received a warm welcome at RTS beyond my fondest dreams. Seven of my former students were on the Orlando faculty and two more at other RTS campuses. More important, many of my colleagues made use of my work and sought to build on it. Many of the writers featured in this volume, as well as others, have been part of that cooperative effort, and we have learned much together. I consider them now to be among the influences on my own thinking and writing.

Most of all, RTS has convinced me that it is possible to have a genuinely, unapologetically Reformed seminary in which believers cooperate peacefully and enthusiastically to prepare students for ministry, without partisanship or rancor. Here we have a slogan: we are not T.R. ("truly Reformed") or B.R. ("barely Reformed"), but W.R. ("winsomely Reformed"). The seminary has provided me with a vision of what seminary education can be, one that I honestly hope will be implemented elsewhere.

Historical

I would be remiss if I didn't list among the influences on my work people who wrote before my own lifetime. I am not primarily a historical theologian, and my reading has been more in recent and contemporary sources than in older writings. Yet to be Reformed at all is to be profoundly influenced by the Reformers, their predecessors, and their successors.

Among the church fathers, Athanasius is my favorite—a man persecuted for his faith, but courageous and steadfast, and right about so many things, so early.

39. See, for example, *TRAD*.

Augustine has certainly been important to me, particularly his *Confessions*, the *City of God*, and his earlier philosophical/epistemological work, such as *Soliloquies* and *On the Teacher*. His teaching on the Trinity is profound, and I think more scriptural than the rather facile "social Trinitarianism" that has caught the imagination of many today. And so much more should be said about this wonderful, godly Christian teacher.

Anselm of Canterbury has been a special interest of mine since my AB thesis on the ontological argument at Princeton. His *Proslogium* is a wonderful piece of theology: prayerful, presuppositional, remarkably fresh.

I have spent many hours with Thomas Aquinas, and although I share some of the criticisms of him by Van Til and others, I think he did far more good than harm to the theology of his time, and I have been vastly impressed by his genius.

Of course, Luther and Calvin have meant a great deal to me, as to all other Reformed theologians. My commendations of them could add nothing to their greatness and would only echo the praises of others in the Protestant tradition.

The same should be said of Jonathan Edwards, a great philosopher and Reformed theologian who did a rare thing in our circles: he struck a proper balance between emotions and intellect.

And I yield to no one in admiration of three brilliant and godly men, friends of one another, who set the highest standards for Reformed theology in the 1900s: B. B. Warfield, Abraham Kuyper, and Herman Bavinck.