

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled. (2 Corinthians 10:3-6)

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A Christian Perspective on John Frame By John W. Robbins

Perspectives on the Word of God, An Introduction to Christian Ethics, John M. Frame. Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1990, indexes, 66 pages, \$5.95.

It is always instructive to read books written by seminary professors, for from these books Christian laymen can find out what is being taught in the seminary classes. From these books we learn what the future teachers of the church have already learned, and that, in some cases, is not only instructive, but positively alarming.

John M. Frame is Associate Professor of Apologetics and Systematic Theology at Westminster Seminary in California. This book comprises three lectures, the Kenneth Kantzer lectures, that he delivered at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Illinois in November 1988. The lectures are entitled: "The Nature of the Word of God," "The Media of the Word of God," and "The Word of God and Christian Ethics." He reports that this little book "presents in brief some of the main theses from two of the forthcoming volumes [of his theology trilogy], *The Doctrine of the Word of God* and *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*." Frame has already published *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, which we hope to review in a future *Trinity Review*.

The Orthodox Pharisees

Frame wastes no time making startling statements. In a footnote on page 5 he writes: "The Pharisees were very orthodox in their beliefs but, Jesus teaches us, devoid of true faith."

Now Jesus does teach us that the Pharisees generally were "devoid of true faith," but he teaches us that by denying that the Pharisees were orthodox in their beliefs: "You hypocrites! Blind Guides! Lovers of Money! If you believed Moses you would believe me; for he wrote about me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?" Christ explicitly denies that the Pharisees held orthodox beliefs. Christ disagrees with Professor Frame.

Frame offers us a paradox -as his school of theology is so fond of doing -the paradox of an orthodox believer who does not believe orthodoxy. He confuses himself and his readers by using two words: faith and belief, as though they were different things. Jesus is not so confused, nor is the rest of the Bible: Faith and belief are the same, a true believer is one who believes the truth, and true faith is faith in the truth. As Jesus said, the Pharisees were devoid of true faith because they did not believe Moses, that is, they did not believe Moses' writings. (Notice that "believing Moses" is "believing Moses' writings" and "believing me [Jesus]" is "believing my [Jesus'] words." Trusting a person and believing his words are the same thing.)

Frame's elementary confusion about faith, which vitiates the rest of what he has to say about faith and psychology, could easily have been avoided had Frame believed what the Bible has to say about the mind and faith. But the school of theology to which Frame belongs has been struggling against the intellect for fifty years.

No Revelation

On the following page, Frame indicates that he prefers the word “word” to the word “revelation”: “There is a sense in which we do not have ‘revelation’ (cf. F. Gerald Downing, *Has Christianity a Revelation?* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964]), but we do have the word.” Nevertheless, he continues, “we *apprehend* God’s revelation by means of human reason, human sense experience, and the whole range of hard to define intuitions, feelings, and consciousness we call ‘subjectivity.’ None of these, in itself, gives absolute knowledge. If it did, we would not need God’s word. But these human faculties work together, in mutual dependence, to lead us toward that truth, which is absolute and final, God’s word to us.”

This paragraph raises a number of questions: If sense experience, reason, intuitions, and feelings work together “to lead us toward that truth,” do we ever get there? Do we ever have truth? Or are we left with what Frame calls “human knowledge,” as opposed to “absolute knowledge”? Worse, if anything could be worse, is Frame suggesting that feelings, reason, and sense experience, as distinct from revelation, are the only sources of truth? As we shall see, that seems to be exactly what he is saying. He seems to have abandoned every conception of an epistemology that does not rely on feelings, sense experience, and what he calls reason. Frame seems to have discarded revelation as an independent source of truth. He writes of human faculties leading us toward the truth; the Christian idea is that truth comes from God to man. Frame has the epistemological situation upside down.

A Humanistic Framework

Frame’s entire scheme ignores the insuperable problems of empiricism, rationalism, and irrationalism outlined by Gordon Clark in his *Three Types of Religious Philosophy*. Clark demonstrates that man cannot discover truth using his own faculties; that man is totally dependent upon God and revelation for truth; and that God reveals truth, man does not discover it. Frame seems to be of the opinion that if we combine the results of these three human faculties -reason, sensation, and feelings - so flimsy in themselves, we can arrive at knowledge. To borrow a phrase, this might be called the three leaky buckets theory of knowledge: Each bucket leaks like a sieve, but taken together, they hold water. It doesn’t work with water, and it doesn’t work with theology either.

Frame thinks that the “evidentialist” (the empiricist) “has a point to make also, from the situational perspective. He says that we must offer evidence; we must be willing and able to show a correspondence between our theology and the real world. I gladly acknowledge that point, so you can call me an evidentialist as well as a presuppositionalist!” (7-8).

This statement ignores the insuperable problems with a correspondence theory of truth. It wrongly assumes that the evidentialist, through sensation, knows the “real world.” It wrongly assumes that the empiricist knows what evidence is. More importantly, it implies that Christian theology is not real, for it is not part of the “real world,” but merely something that “corresponds” to the “real world.” Frame’s humanistic epistemology authorizes sensate man to judge revelation according to his sensations.

Subjectivism

Frame’s confusion gets worse. Not only are evidentialism and presuppositionalism both valuable, he says, so is subjectivism: “I can also find some value in the ‘subjectivist’ apologetics found in Pascal, Kierkegaard, and others....” Which others? one must ask. Perhaps he will tell us in his forthcoming books.

Does Frame endorse Pascal’s Wager as an apologetic device? Because the Wager is “subjective,” it works as well for Muslims as it does for Christians. Does Frame join Kierkegaard’s battle against the intellect? I fear that he does, for Frame’s apologetics is a tissue of fallacies from beginning to end. In my classes on apologetics I quote Kierkegaard in order to refute him, not praise him: “It was intelligence and nothing else that had to be opposed. Presumably that is why I, who had the job, was armed with an immense intelligence.”

On page 10 Frame opines that the phrase “word of God” is “in some mysterious way...a name of God’s eternal Son.” Had he read Gordon Clark’s book, *The Johannine Logos*, the mystery would have been cleared up. Trouble is, I think Frame has indeed read Clark’s book, but he prefers to conduct his discussion as if it and Clark had never existed. In this Frame is not alone. Most of the writing produced by seminary teachers today is based on a sort of an anti-Voltairean principle: Since Gordon Clark does exist, we shall have to ignore him. The

reason is simple: Clark's books are both irrefragable and directly contrary to the empiricism and irrationalism prevalent among contemporary theologians.

Revelation Denied

In his second lecture Frame tells us that "All of God's word to us is mediated, in the sense that it always reaches us through some creaturely means" (19). Notice the "all" and the "always."

He gives this example: "This is true even when revelation seems most 'direct.' For example, when God spoke to the people of Israel gathered around Mt. Sinai, and they heard the divine voice from Heaven, even then God's word reached the people through creaturely media. For one thing, God spoke human language. For another, he used the normal earthly atmosphere to transmit the sounds to the eardrums of the people. Further, it was the people's brain cells that interpreted the sounds as words and interpreted the words as God's message. God's word never lacks media when it is spoken to human beings" (19-20). Notice the "never." Frame means to deny that God's revelation is ever direct or immediate.

This paragraph reveals how much an empiricist, even a behaviorist, John Frame is. Let us address his assertions in the order in which he makes them.

First, Frame assumes that language is human and therefore "creaturely." Apparently he has forgotten *Genesis*, where God speaks first in erecting the world, and then speaks to Adam in a language that God gave to Adam. Language originated with God, not man. The language Adam spoke originated with God, not Adam. Language is part of God's nature, and it is part of the image of God, man's rationality. Frame's theory of language, to the extent that he can be said to have a theory, is not supported by Scripture.

Second, Frame unreflectingly adopts the current opinions of scientists and asserts that sounds are transmitted by vibrations in the atmosphere, which bang on the eardrums, which rattle the brain. He cites no Scripture supporting this view. The Bible tells us that God hears our prayers. Does this mean that God lives in an atmosphere and has eardrums and brain cells as well? When Christ carried on a conversation with Moses and Elijah, did they have brain cells and eardrums? When God speaks, do

his vocal cords set the air to vibrating? Do Christ and the saints in Heaven use molecular vibrations to rattle each other's brains? Frame's theory of the transmission of revelation is not supported by Scripture. Perhaps he derived it from his feelings.

Third, Frame thinks that brain cells "interpret" vibrations in the air as words and words as God's message. Brain cells can do none of these things. Brain cells are complex organic chemicals; they do not, they cannot, interpret anything. Frame's views are behaviorism, straight out of the books of J. B. Watson and B. F. Skinner. Only minds, not cells, hear, understand, and interpret.

John, in the first chapter of his *Gospel*, tells us that Christ lights the mind of every man. Directly Jesus tells Peter, and us, that God the Father revealed his truth directly without the mediation of flesh and blood. Frame's empirical and behaviorist theory of knowledge is not supported by Scripture. There is no verse in the Bible -none -that supports the idea that brain cells interpret and understand. There is no verse that says that revelation depends upon vibrations in the air. There is none that says language is of human origin. The Bible denies empiricism and behaviorism. There is a world of difference between John Frame's little book and another little book written 1,500 years ago, Augustine's *De Magistro*. One reflects Scripture; the other reflects the confusion of the twentieth century.

Biblicism

Frame belabors his opinion that God's revelation is always "mediated" through "creaturely" means. Let us grant his opinion merely for the sake of argument. What follows? That we do not have the absolute truth? Consider this: The Bible was, in fact, written by men - worse, by sinful men. Is it therefore less than wholly true? Is it less than God intended it to be? Is not God omnipotent, and if he decides to reveal truth to man can he not do so? Frame seems to be implying that all "creaturely" mediation implies degradation. Undoubtedly some forms of mediation do. Ironically, it is those forms of mediation that Frame endorses that would, at best, distort revelation.

But Frame's confusion gets worse.

Frame asserts that "God reveals through events, words, and people" (20). "The right use of each

form of revelation requires [note well] the use of the others..., Our understanding grows not by looking at the forms of revelation [such as the Bible] in isolation from one another, but by constantly correlating them, comparing them, and viewing them together" (33). Frame goes on to warn us against "biblicism."

The question that must be asked at this point is this: What has happened to *sola Scriptura*? What has happened to the Reformation principle: the Bible alone? What has happened to the sufficiency of Scripture? Frame admits that "the Holy Scriptures play an absolutely crucial role in the overall organism of revelation," but that role, he says, is "the covenant constitution of the people of God."

The absolutely crucial question for Frame is this: What role do the Scriptures play in providing men with truth? His answer is that Scripture is but one of at least three sources of truth. "Biblicism," taking the Bible as the source of truth in isolation from either sense experience or feelings, Frame says, is not "Biblically defensible,"

According to Frame, God's word is available from three sources: the Bible, the world, and the self (52). (Oddly, he cites Scripture for this bizarre statement.) "A Christian will study these three realms presupposing their coherence and therefore seeking at each point to integrate each source of knowledge with the other two" (52). In fact, Frame asserts, "we cannot know what Scripture says without knowing at the same time something of God's revelation outside of Scripture" (53). The Bible does not seem to be Frame's only source of truth, let alone his axiom or presupposition.

Frame concludes his lectures by saying that "The view I am presenting...has ecumenical implications." "None of these perspectives [Scripture, situation, subjectivity] rightly understood, takes precedence over the other two, because each includes the other two" (56).

Conclusion

We, too, ought to draw some conclusions from these statements and Frame's book.

First, Frame simply has not done his homework. Until he answers the arguments against the non-Christian epistemologies of empiricism, rationalism,

and subjectivism in detail, his entire theological enterprise is, to be as charitable as possible, a complete waste of time, energy, and money.

Second, Frame's eclectic epistemology is fatal to Christian thought. Frame repeatedly speaks favorably of theological liberals. *Sola Scriptura* disappears. God's revelation gets lost in a melange of feelings, intuitions, and sensations. Frame seems not to have grasped any of the philosophical implications of the phrase, "in him we live and move and have our being." Or of the first chapter of *John*. Or of *Romans* 1. Or even of *Genesis* 1. To him, revelation is not an independent source of knowledge at all, for it is always "mediated" by "sense," by "feelings," or by "reason." In John Frame's world, we are imprisoned in a creaturely box that prevents us from knowing absolute truth and prevents God from revealing his truth to us directly. It is a crime that this sort of confusion is being taught in seminary, especially in a seminary that is reputed to be conservative and orthodox.

Correspondence

Recently we asked periodicals to which we had been sending review copies of our books if they wished to continue to receive them. Here are some of the more interesting responses:

Dear Mr. Robbins

Thank you for your letter of October 26, 1991. Since it is unlikely that we will be publishing reviews or notices of Gordon Clark's writings in the future it is not necessary to send us your review copies.

Sincerely,

John Bolt, Editor,

Calvin Theological Journal (Calvin Seminary)

Dear Sir:

We have received several of your books for review over the past 4 years and have reviewed a couple of them in a publication we published for about two years, *Pilgrim Examiner*. Recently we received a letter asking if we wish to continue receiving review copies. We really find no time or benefit reviewing this type of book, so we ask you to stop sending

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review books. We are returning a few of the books you sent.

Sincerely,

Charles H. Shofstahl,

Pilgrim Brethren Press

Dear Mr. Robbins:

Thank you for the books you have sent us for review. We appreciated receiving them. At this time, we do not wish to continue receiving review copies. You may take us off your mailing list. I am retiring as book review editor. If you have any questions, please direct them to Lin Williams who is taking over as the new book review editor.

Sincerely,

Marvin T. Hunn,

Bibliotheca Sacra (Dallas Theological Seminary)