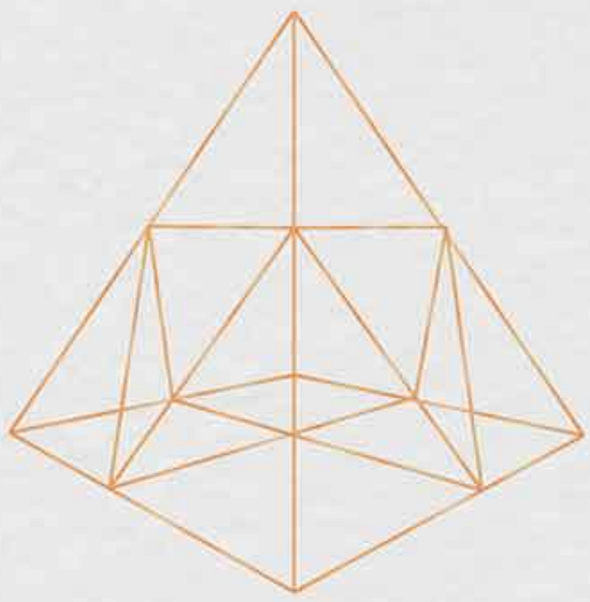
KNOWING AND THE TRINITY

How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity



VERN S. POYTHRESS

"This book begins simply enough, but soon we discover that it opens our eyes to refreshing new ways of viewing God, the Bible, ourselves, and the world from multiple perspectives, all grounded ultimately in the mysterious triune nature of God. Poythress has given us in this book the valuable fruit of a lifetime of reflection on the teachings of the whole of Scripture."

—**Wayne Grudem**, Research Professor of Theology and Biblical Studies, Phoenix Seminary

"In this fascinating and highly accessible book, Dr. Poythress puts his perspectival method to work in a wide-ranging exploration of Trinitarian theology. Underlying his discussion is the conviction that while this is a mystery surpassing our capacities, God has revealed himself in creation and grace, his triune fingerprints evident wherever we turn. Any discussion of the doctrine of God should take Poythress's important contribution into serious consideration. I know of nothing else quite like it."

—**Robert Letham**, Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology, Union School of Theology (formerly Wales Evangelical School of Theology)

"In recent decades, many evangelical scholars, students, and laypeople have found triperspectivalism extraordinarily helpful, but they have also found it confusing. Vern Poythress has given us what amounts to a primer on this subject. His explanations are brief and clear. He securely anchors his outlooks in the Scriptures and in orthodox Trinitarian theology. The illustrations and glossary make Poythress's discussions accessible to a wide range of readers. Study questions encourage both theoretical and practical reflection. This book is a window into ways of thinking about and living the Christian faith that will greatly benefit us all."

—**Richard L. Pratt Jr.**, President, Third Millennium Ministries

"Poythress has done it again. *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity* is a fresh discussion on how a robust understanding of God's triune being deepens, challenges, and expands our notions of human knowledge and theological method.

Poythress dispels myths of perspectivalism (especially the all-too-common objection of relativism) and persuasively argues for the deeply related and organic nature of God's revelation. My hope is that Poythress's example will produce much biblically faithful theological creativity."

—**Joseph E. Torres**, Editor, John M. Frame's *Apologetics: A Justification of Christian Belief*

"For many years now, we have seen the fruitful use of multiperspectivalism or triperspectivalism in the Reformed theology of John Frame and Vern Poythress. Poythress now opens up for us a window onto the rich tapestry of the triad of perspectives in *Knowing and the Trinity*. He grounds the use of perspectives in the being of the triune God of Scripture and demonstrates their theoretical and practical value. These perspectives do not undermine the absolute truth of God and his Word but expose us to the ever-increasing depth that we discover in God's Word and world. Poythress shows us that triadic perspectives are analogues of God's triune being as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, are revealed in the flow of salvation history, are experienced in our space and time, and culminate in the glory of the new heaven and the new earth. Here we have unpacked for us the rationale behind triperspectivalism, and the author demonstrates its theological wealth. I heartily recommend this new book."

—**Jeffrey C. Waddington**, Stated Supply, Knox Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Lansdowne, Pennsylvania

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VERN S. POYTHRESS

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To John Frame,
who taught me about perspectives

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Foreword

AUGUSTINE WAS WISE when he wrote in his landmark work *De Trinitate*: "In no other subject is error more dangerous, or inquiry more laborious, or the discovery of truth more profitable."[1] To write a book that contributes to our understanding of and love for God the Trinity is surely a crowning achievement for any theologian. It is therefore a privilege to serve as the doorman to welcome readers into the remarkable world of reflections that Dr. Vern Poythress provides for us in this substantial work.

I suspect that if we were to ask, "How long did it take you to write *Knowing and the Trinity*?," it would be appropriate for Professor Poythress to answer (with his engaging and modest smile), "My whole life." Yet while the exposition he gives here of the Trinity may be the capstone of his work thus far, there is also a sense in which it has been the foundation stone of everything else he has written. For just as the beginning of the Christian life is marked by baptism into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit and then the whole of the Christian life is lived in the light of this reality, the same may be said of Vern Poythress's many contributions to our understanding of the gospel.

Every book, no matter what the subject, is in some sense an expression of the author's autobiography. Even a work such as Alexander Cruden's *Concordance* finds its place in the story of its compiler's life. Similarly, readers familiar with Dr. Poythress will be able to detect various streams of preparation in his life as they converge in *Knowing and the Trinity*. Appropriately, perhaps, three of them stand out.

Here we meet the mind of a mathematician. Valedictorian of the class of 1966 at California Institute of Technology, Vern Poythress soon earned a Ph.D. in mathematics from Harvard. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that he has long been fascinated by the mystery of the

1. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 1.3.5.

Three-in-One God, or that the young professor of mathematics soon transitioned to theological studies and a lifetime in theological education in which he has both explored and taught the principle that the Trinity is the mystery in which all other mysteries ultimately make sense.

I once teased another mathematician friend who was professor of number theory in one of the ancient British universities: "Are you paid to sit in a darkened room all day to do nothing but think about numbers?" He gave the adept riposte, "Not at all. I am doing the same thing you do—studying theology—only without words!" In this, of course, he was simply echoing Johannes Kepler's *bon mot* about "thinking God's thoughts after him."[2] Vern Poythress stands in this great tradition. *Knowing and the Trinity* expresses a mind trained to move with careful logic in the process of reaching its conclusions and with admirable patience in taking the reader step by step through his reasoning processes.

Here we also meet the mind of the theologian and professor of New Testament interpretation at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia who has also devoted himself, among much else, to the study of linguistics, epistemology, and hermeneutics. All of this—involving some fifty years of preparation—comes to expression in these fascinating chapters and contributes to their distinctiveness.

At the same time, readers will notice a third stream running into and through these pages. The great Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck once noted: "It is absolutely necessary that the person who cultivates any branch of knowledge first of all, and most of all, study to be modest and humble. This applies especially to the theologian. He should not think of himself more highly than he ought to think."[3] In that same spirit, *Knowing and the Trinity* is suffused with a humble desire to submit all the preformed and inherited thoughts we bring to the study of theology to the scrutiny of the revelation that God himself gives of himself. No theologian's mind is a *tabula rasa*. But all our preconceptions must be laid in tribute before God's own self-revelation, to be cleansed, expanded, and, when necessary, corrected. Deeply embedded in these pages is the principle that the study of theology is always an exercise in cognitive repentance. Here, too, the

2. "Johannes Kepler," *New World Encyclopedia*, http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Johannes_Kepler (accessed February 13, 2018).

3. Danny Wyatt, "Reformed Meditations," http://reformedmeditations.blogspot.com/2010/?m=0 (accessed February 13, 2018).

first of Martin Luther's Ninety-five Theses applies: "When our Lord Jesus Christ said 'repent' he meant that the whole of the Christian life should be repentance."[4] In keeping with this, the student of theology who brings thoroughly orthodox concepts and language to the exploration of the Trinity discovers that progress in understanding always involves a renewal of the mind in the light of divine revelation.

It is in this spirit that Dr. Poythress undertakes the task of helping us to see the sheer wonder of God as we reflect on his self-testimony. Recognizing that we do this "with all the saints" (Eph. 3:18), he shows appropriate reverence for the great theological tradition, its concepts, and its vocabulary. In addition, he shares the love for God's person that was present in the work of the early fathers. (Students who lack patience with them surely think too little of how deeply offended they themselves would be if someone they knew and loved were carelessly described!)

Knowing and the Trinity makes no attempt to *solve* the mystery of the Trinity (as though God's triune being were a problem to himself!), nor to *dissolve* that mystery (which so endangers the pride of man's desire for autonomous reasoning, making himself the measure of all things). Rather, as has been true of every theologian who passes Bavinck's test, Vern Poythress allows the mystery to shine in all its glory so that in its light we see light, believing with John Robinson (the Pilgrim fathers' pastor) that "the Lord hath more truth and light to break forth from his holy Word."[5] He thus takes his place in a long line of theologians going back through John Owen (with his great experiential-theological contribution *On Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost*) to John Calvin (with his insistence on the autotheistic nature of the Son), and behind them to Anselm (who wrote on the procession of the Holy Spirit), to the Cappadocian fathers and Augustine and then to Tertullian (to whom we owe the very term *trinitas*).

We ourselves are always pilgrim theologians. Our theology is a *theologia viatorum* until the knowledge of faith is consummated in the *visio Dei*. Perhaps even then it may continue to deepen, just as holy seraphim ever enunciate their *Trisagion* without coming to an end of either their comprehension or their adoration. Until that day, the theologian's task

4. "Ninety-five Theses," *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ninety-five_Theses (accessed February 13, 2018).

5. David H. Bauslin, "Freedom of Teaching," *The Lutheran Quarterly* 39 (April 1909): 200.

is to lead us to the limits of divine revelation, recognize the presence of the perimeter fence, and then, as Dr. Poythress does from time to time in these pages, invite us to bow in adoring wonder before the greatness of the incomprehensible triune God, who has made himself so fully known to us.

Who can speak of God? We must. Yet, Job-like, we then place our hands over our mouths and bow down in worship. At the same time, in this, the greatest of all pursuits, we recognize with Thomas à Kempis, "What profit will it be to you if you can argue profoundly about the Trinity if you are empty of humility and thus have become displeasing to the Trinity?"[6] But we also want to be able to say with Jeremiah, "Let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD" (Jer. 9:24).

In *Knowing and the Trinity*, Vern Poythress helps us to do precisely this. So now, having completed my doorman's task, I bid you to explore and enjoy!

Sinclair B. Ferguson
Chancellor's Professor of Systematic Theology
Reformed Theological Seminary

6. Thomas à Kempis, trans. and ed. William C. Creasy, *The Imitation of Christ by Thomas a Kempis: A New Reading of the 1441 Latin Autograph Manuscript*, 2nd ed. (Mercer University Press, 2015), 3.

Introduction: Reflections of the Trinity

MY FRIEND JOHN FRAME and I have been using and discussing perspectives for over forty years.[1] I would now like to write about where they come from.[2] They are a gift from God. But in what way? They reflect God's Trinitarian nature.

What is the Trinity? The Bible teaches that God is one God in three persons—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. (We will review the biblical teaching on the Trinity in chapter 6.) God the Creator is distinct from everything that he created. No created thing has exactly the same kind of unity, the unity of being three in one.

So it might seem strange to say that there are reflections of the Trinity in the created world. But God did *make* the world. So his character is reflected in it (Ps. 19:1; Rom. 1:19–20). In fact, his Trinitarian nature is reflected in God's actions toward us and his relation to us, as we will see.[3]

1. Short introductions include John M. Frame, "A Primer on Perspectivalism," 2008, http://www.frame-poythress.org/a-primer-on-perspectivalism/, republished in *John Frame's Selected Shorter Writings, Volume 1* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2014), 1–18; Vern S. Poythress, "Multiperspectivalism and the Reformed Faith," in *Speaking the Truth in Love: The Theology of John M. Frame*, ed. John J. Hughes (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 173–200, http://frame-poythress.org/multiperspectivalism-and-the-reformed-faith/. More elaborately, Vern S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987; repr., Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001); John M. Frame, *Theology in Three Dimensions: A Guide to Triperspectivalism and Its Significance* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017). For more historical information, see John M. Frame, "Backgrounds to My Thought," in *Speaking the Truth in Love: The Theology of John M. Frame*, ed. John J. Hughes (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 9–30. See also Timothy E. Miller, *The Triune God of Unity in Diversity: An Analysis of Perspectivalism, the Trinitarian Theological Method of John Frame and Vern Poythress* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017).

2. I am grateful to Timothy E. Miller for helping me to see the value of writing on this subject (Miller, *The Triune God*).

3. See Fred Sanders, *The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything* (Wheaton,

A Reflection of the Trinity in Salvation

Let us begin with an example, by considering how God saves us. God the Father has planned our salvation from all eternity: "He [God the Father] chose us in him [Christ] before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4). "He predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ" (v. 5). God's planning took place "in him," that is, in Christ. Then in the fullness of time, Christ came to earth and accomplished our salvation in his death and resurrection (Rom. 4:25; Gal. 4:4). The Father and the Son then sent the Holy Spirit in order to apply Christ's accomplishment to the church and to each individual in it (John 15:26; Acts 2:33; Eph. 1:13–14). All three persons of the Trinity are involved. The entire program of God is one unified program, in which each person of the Trinity participates in a distinct way, but each person of the Trinity is present with the others in every work.

God is always the Trinitarian God—even before he created the world. In addition, within the world he reflects who he is in the way in which he accomplishes salvation. Everyone who is saved by God relies on what each person of the Trinity has done and is doing.

A Reflection of the Trinity in Adoption

One aspect of salvation is that God undertakes to adopt us as his sons through Jesus Christ. When he adopts us, we become part of his family of children, with whom he establishes a fatherly relation of intimacy. This intimacy is a precious aspect of being saved.

God's act of adoption involves the work of all three persons of the Trinity. God the Father is the one who adopts us, so that we become his sons. God the Son became incarnate and identified with us, so that we might be forgiven and receive the status of sons through his unique sonship: "God sent forth his *Son* . . . to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive *adoption as sons*" (Gal. 4:4–5). Then God the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in us and testify that we are God's sons by crying with us, "Abba! Father!" (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6).

In sum, God's Trinitarian character is reflected in the way he works to adopt us as sons. When we who are Christian believers relate to God

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IL: Crossway, 2010). Sanders's book stimulated this introductory chapter.

as our Father, we are relying on God's Trinitarian character, which is at work in our adoption.

A Reflection of the Trinity in God's Speech

Let us consider another example: the example of God's speech. Long ago, God spoke orally to Abraham, Isaac, and prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah. He also commissioned some of his servants to write his words down for subsequent generations, and we have his word in permanent form in the Bible. The climactic communication from God comes in his Son: "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by *his Son*" (Heb. 1:1–2). This climactic communication is also reflected in a subordinate way in all of God's speech to us, because Christ is the Mediator for God's speech. God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are present with God the Father when he speaks.

We can see how this speech took place in a focused way when Jesus was on earth. He says, "I have given them [the disciples] the words that you [the Father] gave me" (John 17:8). He also promises that the Holy Spirit will speak what he hears from the Father and the Son:

> When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he *hears* he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take *what is mine* and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you. (John 16:13–15)

The word of God comes from the Father to the Son, and through the Holy Spirit it comes to be received and believed by the disciples. What took place while Jesus was on earth illustrates in climactic form a broader pattern. The second person of the Trinity is "the Word," according to John 1:1. Particular words from God offer us an expression of this eternal Word. All of God's speech takes place in the words of the Son. And the Holy Spirit is always present to bring those words to their destination. Thus, God's Trinitarian character is reflected when he speaks. When we listen to God speaking, as we read the Bible or hear a sermon based on it, we rely on the Trinitarian character of God,

according to which all three persons are present and at work when God speaks.[4]

A Reflection of the Trinity in God's Presence

God's Trinitarian character is also expressed in the way in which he makes himself present to us. One of the names given to Jesus is *Immanuel*, which means "God with us" (Matt. 1:23). The name implies not only that Jesus has come to be with us, but that in him God the Father is with us. This presence finds its fulfillment when Jesus sends the Holy Spirit:

> And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be *with you* forever, even the Spirit of truth. (John 14:16–17a)

> If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead *dwells in you*, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who *dwells in you*. (Rom. 8:11)

Thus, when we are saved and we experience the intimate presence of God with us, we rely on the Trinitarian character of God.

A Reflection of the Trinity in Prayer

Christians who are praying to God rely on God's Trinitarian character. We pray to God the Father (Matt. 6:9), and Jesus the Son intercedes for us (Heb. 7:25). The Holy Spirit who dwells within us "intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words" (Rom. 8:26). God's Trinitarian character is reflected in the way in which God meets with us as we pray.

Reflections of God in Perspectives

In sum, God's Trinitarian character is displayed in the ways in which he establishes a personal relation to us—in salvation, in adoption, in verbal communication to us, in his presence with us, and in our prayers. So it is fitting to ask whether God's character is reflected in still other ways. One of these ways might be in giving us *perspectives*.

As we think about perspectives, we can grow in appreciating wonder

4. Ibid., chap. 6.

of who God is. We can grow in praising him and standing in awe of him. That is the goal. Such praise is exemplified in many passages of the Bible:

> Praise the LORD!
> Praise God in his sanctuary;
> praise him in his mighty heavens!
> Praise him for his mighty deeds;
> praise him according to his excellent greatness! (Ps. 150:1–2)

> Worthy are you, our Lord and God,
> to receive glory and honor and power,
> for you created all things,
> and by your will they existed and were created. (Rev. 4:11)

God has given us many works in creation, providence, and redemption for which we can lift our voices in praise. The gift of perspectives can be included in the list.

Key Terms

adoption[5]
application of redemption
God's speech (God's word)
perspective
prayer
presence (of God)
salvation
Trinity

Study Questions

1. In what ways do we see God's Trinitarian character reflected in his works? Consider aspects of redemption in particular.
2. Why is the Trinity important?
3. How can the biblical teaching about the Trinity be briefly summarized?

5. Key terms in **bold** are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

4. How should we respond to the revelation of God in his Trinitarian character?

For Further Reading

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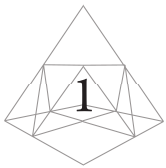
PART 1

WHAT ARE PERSPECTIVES?

WE EXPLAIN PERSPECTIVES and then consider three kinds: spatial perspectives, personal perspectives, and thematic perspectives. A spatial perspective is a view of a visible scene from a particular vantage point in space. A personal perspective is the view that an individual person has concerning the world or some subject. A thematic perspective is a temporary thematic starting point for exploring a subject matter, with the hope of discovering more and growing in truth.



The Mystery of Perspectives

WHAT IS A *PERSPECTIVE*? We will address that question in the next few chapters. In one sense, the idea of using a perspective is fairly simple. You observe a physical object from a new angle. If you do, you may notice something that you did not notice before. The same principle applies to studying a particular subject matter, such as politics or music or the family. You can sometimes learn things by asking new kinds of questions about a subject, or looking at it using a new theme.

The Mystery of God

It would be simple if we could just leave it at that. But mysteries open up if we ask why human beings can use multiple perspectives, and why they are useful. Ultimately, the chain of *why* questions goes back to God. He created us. He made us with these capabilities. This pathway leads to still wider questions: who is God, and why did he create us the way he did?

According to the Bible, God is *Trinitarian*. He is one God in three persons. What significance might the Trinity have for understanding *perspectives*? Over the years, John Frame and I have employed groups of three perspectives. Is the number *three* significant? Is it related to the Trinity?

A Triad of Perspectives

Let us take an example. John Frame explains God's lordship by using three perspectives or ways of looking at lordship: *authority*, *control*, and *presence*.[1] Let us consider these three, one at a time. First, God exercises

1. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and

authority over us, and we are responsible to him to live in accordance with his instruction and his righteousness. Second, as Lord over all, God *controls* the world and all human agents within it. Third, God is *present* all over the world, and every human being lives in his presence. All three of these truths about God are practical. As human beings, we should respond to God by acknowledging his authority, by experiencing and submitting to his control, and by enjoying his presence.

So we have three terms: *authority*, *control*, and *presence*. Why three rather than two or four? We may note that these three all function together to expound one coherent body of truth about God's lordship. There is only *one* Lord; at the same time, there are these three perspectives for appreciating his lordship. It is one in three. Is that just an accident?

John Frame and I have from time to time pointed out relationships between a triad of perspectives and the three persons in God. Frame observes that God the Father claims *authority* over all. God through his Son *controls* the world. Through Jesus the Son we experience the power of God, saving us from our sins. And God is *present* everywhere especially through the Holy Spirit, who comes to dwell in those who believe in Christ the Savior.[2]

So what is the relationship between the Trinitarian character of God and the triad of perspectives on lordship? Does the triad somehow *derive* from the Trinity? If so, how? And would the same be true for other triads? How could more than one triad derive in the same way from the same source?[3]

The Importance of the Trinity

People who have interacted with John Frame and me over the years have sometimes wondered about these questions. I propose, then, to

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Reformed, 1987), 15–18; John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002).

2. Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 727; John M. Frame, "A Primer on Perspectivalism," 2008, http://www.frame-poythress.org/a-primer-on-perspectivalism/, republished in John Frame's *Selected Shorter Writings, Volume 1* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2014), 1–18.

3. It is interesting that Saint Augustine explores analogies in creation that he finds dimly reflecting the Trinitarian character of God (Augustine, "On the Holy Trinity," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1st ser., ed. Philip Schaff [London: T&T Clark, 1980], 17–228). At the same time, Augustine indicates that none of these analogies or illustrations fully captures the nature of God; all of them have limitations. The same holds for the analogies that we explore.

tackle the questions head-on. Let us look at perspectives and explore their relation to the Trinity.[4] This process is potentially valuable, because we can grow in knowing God. We can grow in knowing the Trinity. God made us with the purpose that we would know him. So knowing him is of vital importance for us as creatures. It is also of vital importance for our salvation. We need God to rescue us from sin and rebellion. One aspect of that rescue process is that we come to know him (John 17:3). We come to know him as the Trinitarian God.

The Challenge of the Trinity

But before we plunge into our task, we need a few explanations. To reflect directly on the nature of perspectives is a deep challenge. Why? We find ourselves asking about God. God is the central mystery of the Christian faith. We adore him without completely understanding him.

To be sure, God does give us understanding. God reveals himself in the world that he has made, according to Romans 1:18–23:

> For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in *the things that have been made*. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

God's revelation through the creation is called *general revelation*. It leaves human beings "without excuse" (Rom. 1:20). But it does not lead human beings to spiritual health, because they "suppress the truth" (v. 18). Sin has corrupted human beings in every aspect of their lives. The corruption extends to the mind as well. Our reason is not normal,

4. Timothy E. Miller's book has already undertaken a similar exploration (Miller, *The Triune God of Unity in Diversity: An Analysis of Perspectivalism, the Trinitarian Theological Method of John Frame and Vern Poythress* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017]).

but fallen and corrupted by sin. One effect is that we suppress the truth. We need the *special revelation* of the Bible to enlighten us. We also need Christ's work of salvation, accomplished in his crucifixion and resurrection from the dead, in order to reconcile us to God. And we need the Holy Spirit to come and apply the work of Christ to our hearts and lives. We need God in the work of all three persons of the Trinity.

We should acknowledge that there are two kinds of people in the world today. There are those who remain in their fallen and sinful condition, with corrupted minds. And then there are those who have been saved by Christ and reconciled to God. They have been renewed in the mind through the work of the Spirit of Christ in them. Yet as long as they are in this life, their renewal is partial: they fall into sins, including sins due to corruption in the mind. This book is imperfect and fallible, partly because of the remaining effects of sin.

When God gives us new spiritual birth through the Holy Spirit, we are changed people. We begin to know God in the way that we should, through Christ, who shows us who God is (John 3:3, 5; 14:9; 17:3). We know God, I say. We know him truly and genuinely and personally. But we do not *become* God. God is infinite. God's knowledge is infinite. And his knowledge of *himself* is infinite. God in his Trinitarian character is infinite. God is unique, so that nothing that God made is completely like him.

God is not mysterious to himself, but he is mysterious to us, because our knowledge is always less than his and always derivative from his. Therefore, the Trinity is mysterious to us. We can talk about and appreciate what God tells us about the Trinity through the Bible, but we never *master* God or *master* what he says.

So we cannot do what some people might like to do, that is, to explain the Trinity. No human being can "explain" God so as to sweep away the mystery. For the same reason, we cannot "explain" the relationship of the Trinity to one of the triads of perspectives.

So what might we do? Not much, in comparison with the infinity of God. Nothing at all, unless Christ empowers us: "apart from me [Christ] you can do *nothing*" (John 15:5). As God helps us, we are going to try to look at perspectives and their relation to the Trinity. But we must remember that all our discussion is taking only a few steps in pointing to God in his unfathomable infinity. We must recognize the limitations

in human knowledge—limitations made worse by the corruptions from sin.

Throughout our discussion, I will be incorporating John Frame's ideas. John Frame and I have influenced each other over the course of years, so that sometimes it is not feasible to sort out every distinct influence.[5] Both of us are comfortable using some of the same perspectives, and we use them in similar ways.[6] John Frame's works further illustrate the topic of perspectives. In this book, I am attempting to venture at times beyond what the two of us have already said, and to make explicit some ways in which perspectives have their foundation in the Trinity.

Starting Points

This book attempts to be self-contained, so that people can read this book without having to read everything that John Frame and I have written over the years. Obviously, people can learn more about perspectives by observing how John Frame and I have used them in practice. That helps to fill in a lot of detailed texture concerning what we mean and how someone else could do the same thing. But here I am going to try to include fresh explanations, to avoid the problem of constantly referring to other sources.

At the same time, it is not feasible in this book to cover again the whole scope of biblical teaching—the whole of systematic theology. If you are not a follower of Christ, you need to start with finding out who God is, and who Christ is, by reading the Bible—particularly the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. There are many additional resources to help you.[7] If you are a follower of Christ, I assume

5. John M. Frame, "Backgrounds to My Thought," in *Speaking the Truth in Love: The Theology of John M. Frame*, ed. John J. Hughes (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 23; Vern S. Poythress, "Multiperspectivalism and the Reformed Faith," in *Speaking the Truth in Love: The Theology of John M. Frame*, ed. John J. Hughes (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 182.

6. Timothy E. Miller found a source in which I said (in 1988), "I am in complete agreement with Frame" on perspectivalism (Miller, *The Triune God*, 30, quoting Vern S. Poythress, "God's Lordship in Interpretation," *Westminster Theological Journal* 50, 1 [Spring 1988]: 29n4). In his analysis of perspectivalism, Miller then announces that "we will freely quote from Poythress as well as Frame in defining perspectivalism." I think that his strategy is basically warranted, because Frame and I are indeed very close. But Miller also illumines some subtle "methodological differences" between Frame and me, at least with respect to emphasis and manner of speaking (Miller, *The Triune God*, 30).

7. Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton,

that you know about the way of salvation through Christ. I will also assume that you know that the Bible is the Word of God and has a central role in instructing us in knowing God. You know also that God is the Trinitarian God, one God in three persons. We will start from there.

Knowing Truth

Given the possibilities for misunderstanding, it is important also to say something about truth. Some strands of postmodernist thought use the word *perspective* with a skeptical twist. They may say that everyone has his "perspective"; everyone has what he regards as "truth for him." But, according to these postmodernists, no one really knows. Allegedly, each of us is trapped within the limits of his context.

By contrast, when John Frame and I use the word *perspective*, it does not have this postmodernist twist. We radically disagree with postmodern skepticism and the way that it relativizes truth. We believe in absolute truth—the truth of God. As Frame says, perspectivalism "presupposes absolutism."[8]

God is the absolute standard for all truth. And he makes truth known to human beings through general and special revelation. Christ says that he is "the truth" (John 14:6). In our discussion of perspectives, we assume this framework of understanding. Rightly understood and rightly used, perspectives give us access to truth rather than keeping us away from truth.

Let us consider a simple comparison. A perspective is like a window in my living room, looking out on a garden. The garden represents the truth. In using a perspective, I actually encounter, see, and appreciate truth. I look *through the perspective* at the truth. I really do see the truth—I see the garden. For postmodernist skepticism, on the other hand, a "perspective" is like a rectangular screen that has a picture of a garden on it. The skeptic thinks there is no way to tell what he is really looking at. Is the picture a picture of the garden behind the screen, seen through a more or less transparent screen? Or is the garden seen through a distorting medium, which has altered its colors and shapes? Or is the picture projected onto the screen by a hidden light source? Or is the

2008); J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

8. Frame, "A Primer on Perspectivalism."

picture produced by the screen itself, like a flat-panel TV screen? Or is the picture projected by the mind of the viewer, as in a dream?

The fundamental difference between the skeptic and me is that I believe in and know the God described in Scripture. I understand that God has produced the garden and me and the window and their relations to one another, in such a way that all aspects work together to give me the blessing of his presence and the presence of truth that originated from him. I can go to another window and see the same garden. Through a window, I can access truths about the garden and know things about the garden.

Dependent Ideas

We need also to be aware that some of our knowledge is solid, but other ideas are tentative. Our knowledge of God through Christ is solid: "This is eternal life, that they [disciples] know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3). We know that God is who he is, and that he is Trinitarian, because he has clearly taught us in the Bible.

But not everything that we try to derive from the Bible is equally clear or equally solid. The Bible does not *explicitly* talk about perspectives. We can try to make inferences from what the Bible says or implies indirectly. But when we do it, the results remain dependent on the clearer teachings of the Bible.

Key Terms

authority[9]
control
general revelation
knowledge of God
lordship
new birth
perspective
postmodern skepticism
presence
special revelation

9. Key terms in **bold** are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

Study Questions

1. What relation does John Frame think exists between the persons of the Trinity and the triad for lordship, consisting in authority, control, and presence?
2. What are the limitations in our knowledge of God? How does our knowledge of God relate to God's knowledge of himself?
3. In what sense do non-Christians know God?
4. How do we differentiate between what we know with confidence and what is less certain? Why is this distinction significant for the church and for a Christian believer's relations to other people?

For Further Reading

Frame, John M. *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987. Pp. 15–18. An explanation of the triad of perspectives on lordship: authority, control, and presence.

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