

On Theology

EXPLORATIONS AND
CONTROVERSIES



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JOHN M. FRAME





On Theology: Explorations and Controversies

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To Randy Greenwald

But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained. Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.

—Philippians 3:13b–17

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Preface

This is the fourth volume of my *Selected Shorter Writings*. Most of these have been written between 2015 and the present. The first three volumes were published by P&R Publishers.

I have dedicated this volume to Randy Greenwald, pastor of Covenant Presbyterian Church of Oviedo, who has been our family's pastor for most of the last decade. I am thankful to God for Randy's gentleness and kindness and for his thoughtful preaching ministry to us.

Abbreviations

ACC	<i>The Academic Captivity of Theology</i>
AGG	<i>Apologetics to the Glory of God</i>
CC	<i>Christianity Considered</i>
CVT	<i>Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought</i>
CWM	<i>Contemporary Worship Music: A Biblical Defense</i>
DCL	<i>The Doctrine of the Christian Life</i>
DG	<i>The Doctrine of God</i>
DKG	<i>The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God</i>
DWG	<i>The Doctrine of the Word of God</i>
ER	<i>Evangelical Reunion: Denominations and the One Body of Christ</i>
ESV	English Standard Version
HWPT	<i>History of Western Philosophy and Theology</i>
KJV	King James Version
NCG	<i>Nature's Case for God</i>
NIV	New International Version
NOG	<i>No Other God</i>
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
SBL	<i>Salvation Belongs to the Lord</i>
SSW ₁	<i>Selected Shorter Writings 1</i>
SSW ₂	<i>Selected Shorter Writings 2</i>
SSW ₃	<i>Selected Shorter Writings 3</i>
ST	<i>Systematic Theology</i>
TTD	<i>Theology in Three Dimensions</i>

WAAP	<i>We Are All Philosophers</i>
WCF	Westminster Confession of Faith
WLC	Westminster Larger Catechism
WSC	Westminster Shorter Catechism
WST	<i>Worship in Spirit and Truth</i>
WTJ	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>

PART 1



Theological Method



1

Thirty Maxims for Theologians

IN RESPONSE to the question, “What advice would you offer to theological students and young theologians as they face a lifetime of theological work?” I gave the following thirty-point answer:

1. Consider that you might not really be called to theological work. James 3:1 tells us that not many of us should become teachers and that teachers will be judged more strictly. To whom much (biblical knowledge) is given, of them shall much be required.
2. Value your relationship with Christ, your family, and the church above your career ambitions. You will influence more people by your life than by your theology. And deficiencies in your life will negate the influence of your ideas, even if those ideas are true.
3. Remember that the fundamental work of theology is to understand the Bible, God’s word, and apply it to the needs of people. Everything else—historical and linguistic expertise, exegetical acuteness and subtlety, knowledge of contemporary culture, and philosophical sophistication—must be subordinated to that fundamental goal. If it is not, you may be acclaimed as a historian, linguist, philosopher, or critic of culture, but you will not be a theologian.

4. In doing the work of theology (the fundamental work, #3), you have an obligation to make a case for what you advocate. That should be obvious, but most theologians today haven't a clue as to how to do it. Theology is an argumentative discipline, and you need to know enough about logic and persuasion to construct arguments that are valid, sound, and persuasive. In theology, it's not enough to display knowledge of history, culture, or some other knowledge. Nor is it enough to quote people you agree with and reprobate people you don't agree with. You actually have to make a theological case for what you say.

5. Learn to write and speak clearly and cogently. The best theologians are able to take profound ideas and present them in simple language. Don't try to persuade people of your expertise by writing in opaque prose.

6. Cultivate an intense devotional life and ignore people who criticize this as pietistic. Pray without ceasing. Read the Bible, not just as an academic text. Treasure opportunities to worship in chapel services and prayer meetings, as well as on Sunday. Give attention to your "spiritual formation," however you understand that.

7. A theologian is essentially a preacher, though he typically deals with more arcane subjects than preachers do. But be a good preacher. Find some way to make your theology speak to the hearts of people. Find a way to present your teaching so that people hear God's voice in it.

8. Be generous with your resources. Spend time talking to students, prospective students, and inquirers. Give away books and articles. Don't be tightfisted when it comes to copyrighted materials; grant copy permission to anybody who asks for it. Ministry first, money second.

9. In criticizing other theologians, traditions, or movements, follow biblical ethics. Don't say that somebody is a heretic unless you have a very good case. Don't throw around terms like "another gospel." (People who teach another gospel are under God's curse.) Don't destroy people's reputations by misquoting them, quoting them out of context, or

taking their words in the worst possible sense. Be gentle and gracious unless you have irrefutable reasons for being harsh.

10. When there is a controversy, don't get on one side right away. Do some analytical work first, on both positions. Consider these possibilities: (a) that the two parties may be looking at the same issue from different perspectives, so they don't really contradict; (b) that both parties are overlooking something that could have brought them together; (c) that they are talking past one another because they use terms in different ways; (d) that there is a third alternative that is better than either of the opposing views and that might bring them together; (e) that their differences, though genuine, ought both to be tolerated in the church, like the differences between vegetarians and meat-eaters in Romans 14.

11. If you get a bright idea, don't expect everybody to get it right away. Don't immediately start a faction to promote it. Don't revile those who haven't come to appreciate your thinking. Reason gently with them, recognizing that you could be wrong and arrogant to boot.

12. Don't be reflexively critical of everything that comes out of a different tradition. Be humble enough to consider that other traditions may have something to teach you. Be teachable before you start teaching them. Take the beam out of your own eye.

13. Be willing to reexamine your own tradition with a critical eye. It is unreasonable to think that any single tradition has all the truth or is always right. And unless theologians develop critical perspectives on their own denominations and traditions, the reunion of the body of Christ will never take place. Don't be one of those theologians who are known mainly for trying to make Arminians become Calvinists (or vice versa).

14. See confessional documents in proper perspective. It is the work of theology, among other things, to rethink the doctrines of the confessions and to reform them, when necessary, by the word of God. Do not assume that everything in the confession is forever settled.

15. Don't let your polemics be governed by jealousy, as when a theologian feels bound to be entirely negative toward the success of a megachurch.

16. Don't become known as a theologian who constantly takes potshots at other theologians or other Christians. The enemy is Satan, the world, and the flesh.

17. Guard your sexual instincts. Stay away from internet pornography and illicit relationships. Theologians are not immune from the sins that plague others in the church.

18. Be active in a good church. Theologians need the means of grace as much as other believers. This is especially important when you are studying at a secular university or liberal seminary. You need the support of other believers to maintain proper theological perspective.

19. Get your basic training at a seminary that teaches the Bible as the word of God. Become well-grounded in the theology of Scripture before you go off (as you may, of course) to get firsthand exposure to nonbiblical thought.

20. Come to appreciate the wisdom, even theological wisdom, of relatively uneducated Christians. Don't be one of those theologians who always has something negative to say when a simple believer describes his walk with the Lord. Don't look down at people from what Helmut Thielicke called "the high horse of enlightenment." Often, simple believers know God better than you do, and you need to learn from them, as did Abraham Kuyper, for instance.

21. Don't be one of those theologians who get excited about every new trend in politics, culture, hermeneutics, and even theology, and who think we have to reconstruct our theology to go along with each trend. Don't think you have to be a feminist, e.g., just because everybody else is. Most of the theologies that try to be culturally savvy are unbiblical.

22. Be suspicious of all trendiness in theology. When everybody jumps on some theological bandwagon, whether narrative, feminism, redemptive history, natural law, liturgy, liberation, postmodernism, or whatever, that's the time to awaken your critical faculties. Don't jump on the bandwagon unless you have done your own study. When a theological trend comes along, ask reflexively, "What's wrong with that?" There is always something wrong. It simply is not the case that the newest is the truest. Indeed, many new movements turn out to be false steps entirely.

23. Our system of doctoral-level education requires "original thought," but that can be hard to do, given that the church has been studying Scripture for thousands of years. You'll be tempted to come up with something that sounds new (possibly by writing a thesis that isn't properly theological at all in the sense of #3 above). Well, do it; get it out of the way, and then come back to do some real theology.

24. At the same time, don't reject innovation simply because it is innovative. Even more, don't reject an idea merely because it doesn't sound like what you're used to. Learn to distinguish the sound-look-feel of an idea from what it actually means.

25. Be critical of arguments that turn on metaphors or extrabiblical technical terms. Don't assume that each one has a perfectly clear meaning. Usually they do not.

26. Learn to be skeptical of the skeptics. Unbelieving and liberal scholars are as prone to error as anybody—in fact, more so.

27. Respect your elders. Nothing is so ill-becoming as a young theologian who despises those who have been working in the field for decades. Disagreement is fine, as long as you acknowledge the maturity and the contributions of those you disagree with. Take 1 Timothy 5:1 to heart.

28. Young theologians often imagine themselves as the next Luther, just as little boys imagine themselves as the next Peyton Manning or LeBron James. When they're too old to play cowboys and Indians, they want to play Luther and the Pope. When the real Pope won't play with them, they pick on somebody else and say, "You're it." Look: most likely God has not chosen you to be the leader of a new Reformation. If he has, don't take the exalted title "Reformer" upon yourself. Let others decide if that is really what you are.

29. Decide early in your career (after some experimenting) what to focus on and what not to. When considering opportunities, it's just as important (perhaps more so) to know when to say no as to know when to say yes.

30. Don't lose your sense of humor. We should take God seriously, not ourselves, and certainly not theology. To lose your sense of humor is to lose your sense of proportion. And nothing is more important in theology than a sense of proportion.

2

Beginnings of Theological Papers

AS I MOVE TOWARD the end of my life, I don't expect to write any more major theological works. But there are some ideas in my head that in my view have not been sufficiently expressed, discussed, refuted, or affirmed. If I were to live another fifty years, and if during that time I were accepted as a participant in the theological dialogue, I would like to raise the following ideas for discussion. I would hope that in that case I could express these as questions, in a way that would not provoke certain people to attack them immediately. Theologians are far too inclined to form factions, attacking or supporting ideas, without anything like sufficient thought. Theology is the original "cancel culture." But I think the following points might be means toward unity—bridges between Calvinists and Arminians, philosophers and theologians, different Christian temperaments, political left and right.

1. In the doctrine of the Trinity, we confess that there is one God in three persons. But nobody has ever given a satisfactory definition of "person" from Scripture. Nor has anyone defined the singularity of God, his "substance" or "being," without palpable dependence on pagan Greek philosophy.