

A Review of
John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*
(A Theology of Lordship Series; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008)

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John Frame's *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* presents an attractive and irenic Reformed approach to Christian ethics. This volume is the third in a series entitled "A Theology of Lordship," and the authoritative and normative implications of Lordship are central to this book's presentation of Christian ethics. Following a triadic pattern that apparently dominates this series (I say "apparently" because I have not read the earlier two volumes), Frame argues that one could approach Christian ethics from three different perspectives. The "situational" perspective focuses on the context in which the believer is called on to make ethical decisions. It requires Christians to analyze the situation they find themselves in, asking, "How can we change the world in order to bring glory to God?" (p. 239). The situational perspective leads to a teleological ethic. The second perspective is the "existential." The focus here is on the believer himself or herself, and the key question will be, "How must I be changed, if I am to please God?" (p. 317). The "normative" perspective, finally, looks at the teaching of Scripture, the revelation of God himself, the ultimate moral norm, and asks "What does God tell us to do?" (p. 239). In the terms of classic ethical theory, then, the "normative" perspective leads to a deontological ethic. A "Christian ethical decision," Frame says, "is the application of God's revelation (normative) to a problem (situational) by a person (existential)" (p. 131). Integrating these three perspectives into his overall series theme, Frame suggests that they correspond to aspects of God's lordship: the situational relates to God's control of the world; the existential to

God's presence with his people; and the normative to God's authority. He also presents the three perspectives in terms of three kinds of biblical ethics: "command" ethics (the normative perspective); "narrative" ethics (the situational perspective); and "virtue" ethics (the existential).

Frame repeatedly emphasizes that each of these perspectives offers a valid and important method for getting into the subject of Christian ethics. Frame, however, chooses to focus on the normative perspective in this volume as being most congenial to the Reformed tradition in which he writes and because it provides a closer intergration with the overarching lordship theme. The choice to highlight the normative perspective does not mean that the others can be ignored.

Frame stresses that all three perspectives are necessary for a full-bodied Christian ethics, since they provide checks and balances on one another (p. 36). Hence he integrates the situational and existential perspectives into his presentation of a normative perspective on Christian ethics. The bulk of the volume therefore is occupied with an attempt to answer the question "What does God tell us to do?" by expositing the Decalogue. Before he turns to the biblical material, however, Frame outlines and critiques non-Christian ethical approaches. All are found wanting because absolute ethical principles can be found only in relationship to the God of the Bible: "Moral norms can come only from a personal absolute, and the Bible is the only written revelation that presents such a God to us" (p. 125). Frame concludes the volume with a discussion of "Christ and Culture" and a brief comment on "Personal Spiritual Maturity."

I am grateful for the invitation to review this book. It is a book that I might not otherwise have read or, at least, not read as soon as I did. And reading the book has been significant both for my academic and personal spiritual development. Frame's book has reacquainted me with a broad and very influential approach to biblical ethics considered as a whole. This is a perspective that is too easy to lose sight of in my daily academic focus on New Testament teaching. Frame's

call for the submission of all of life to the normative teaching of Scripture has been used by God to minister to me personally. Nevertheless, without any false humility, I must say also that I am not the best person to be offering a review of this book. My field is New Testament studies, and I am very far from being an expert on ethics in any of its forms. Moreover, while mildly Reformed in my own soteriology, I am not really located in that tradition. And, since Frame's presuppositions and approach are so firmly located in that tradition—one, to be sure, that he is quite forthright about criticizing on occasion—I felt at times as I read this book like an outsider peeking into an intramural debate that I do not know enough about to evaluate fairly. So please take my comments in what follows with a whole shakerful of salt. I am a bit like the blind man touching one part of the elephant. My evaluation of the parts of Frame's book that I feel somewhat competent to address will fall far short of an adequate description of the whole.

I will therefore forego any evaluation of Frame's analysis of non-Christian ethics or of his description of the Christ and culture debate. Abandoning the time-honored review outline of praise followed by criticism, I will mix the two together as I look at three central foci in Frame's approach: *sola Scriptura*, the law, and the Decalogue.

Sola Scriptura

One of the points I most appreciate about Frame's approach is his resolute commitment to derive Christian ethics from Scripture. As I noted above, he finds all non-Christian ethical systems to be finally inadequate because they do not work from the only authoritative source for our knowledge of the biblical God, who is himself the only ethical absolute. Scripture, according to Frame, "speaks of everything implicitly" (p. 152). It is sufficient to "provide all the ultimate norms, all the normative premises, that we need to make any ethical decision" (p. 166). Of course, as the words "ultimate" and "premises" in this quotation suggest, Frame recognizes that

the Bible does not speak directly to many of our most pressing ethical issues. Analogical reasoning becomes very important at this stage. We should seek to relate situations in our culture with comparable situations in Scripture. The *sola Scriptura* that Frame advocates in theory is put into effect throughout the book. It is soaked in Scripture with virtually every ethical move he makes justified by appeal to one passage or another. Similarly, he tries to show the comprehensive scope of Scripture's ethical teaching by applying the text to an astonishingly broad range of contemporary issues, ranging from abortion, climate change, and the death penalty to Christian observance of Halloween, public vs. Christian schools, church music, what movies Christians should attend, and seminary accreditation. I do not always agree with the conclusions that Frame arrives at on these issues, but he is to be commended for bringing his theory about the sufficiency of Scripture into the marketplace of contemporary problems.

However, I also have three questions to raise about Frame's working out of the *sola Scriptura* principle.

First, his focus on the sufficiency of Scripture leads him to deny any independent value to "natural law." Anything we might discover via natural law, Frame argues, must be evaluated in the light of Scripture; so, Frame concludes, "there is no such thing as a natural-law argument apart from Scripture" (p. 245). Natural law therefore, while having significance for apologetics, has no real ethical value. I am uncertain about how to evaluate this claim, although I do think that Paul in Romans 1–2 may suggest a more robust role for natural law. If people are condemned by natural law, then it seems that natural law must have some kind of role to play in defining good and evil. And I wonder about the implications of this claim for the participation of Christians in the "public square." Frame says that "nobody has the right to argue an ethical principle unless he is willing to listen to the God of Scripture" (p. 125). In a specific example of

how this might work out, Frame suggests that the differing scientific evaluations of climate change are to some extent attributable to ideological agendas. So, he concludes, “Only a regenerate society will find agreement on the worldview questions sufficient to save the earth” (p. 745). I have two questions with this approach which, I am told, is probably influenced by Van Til. On the one hand, I wonder if Frame would consistently apply this ideological critique to all scientific investigation—for surely all science is, in Frame’s term, ideologically driven. And on the other hand, I worry that such an approach may make it difficult for Christians to make common cause with non-Christians on a range of issues facing our culture. But I may well be missing the point that Frame wants to make here. And I would be eager to be corrected and/or further enlightened on this matter.

Second, Frame’s concern to bring Scripture to bear on the whole of life is one factor that leads him to question the usefulness of the category “adiaphora.” Frame cites 1 Cor 10:31—“So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God”—and then notes that the “whatever” in this verse includes everything. There is nothing left out that falls into a third category, between what glorifies God and what does not. An activity considered on its own might be neutral; but, Frame argues, every activity we might contemplate is always tied to a particular situation that renders that act right or wrong. I fully endorse the importance of evaluating all our decisions from the standpoint of God’s glory. And Frame admits that some forms of the adiaphora perspective may not be unhelpful. I may not fully understand the distinction he is making. Yet it seems to me that there may be many occasions when we will simply not know which choice we are confronted with will bring most glory to God. And such a decision then, it seems to be, falls—from our perspective at least—into the category appropriately labelled “adiaphora.”

Third, in Frame's concern to hold high the sufficiency of Scripture for our ethical reasoning, he takes to task William Webb's "redemptive movement hermetic" because it "substitutes modern fashion for the authority of Scripture" (p. 641). In a book that I find to be typically fair and irenic, this judgment seems out of character. While I have some difficulty with some of the ways that Webb works out his hermeneutical approach, he is quite clear about using the "authority of Scripture" as his basis for assessing the trajectories of biblical teaching and drawing ethical conclusions from these trajectories. Frame, responding to Webb's appeal to the slavery issue as a reason to adopt his approach, argues that the principles of Scripture are adequate to ground our opposition to modern slavery (p. 661). Yet like many evangelical interpreters, Frame fails to deal with what seems to me the fundamental question: why, since the biblical writers explicitly speak to Christian slave owners about their responsibilities, do they not simply forbid Christians to own slaves? Were the biblical writers suddenly overcome with a case of "cultural cowardice," reluctant to tackle a moral evil because it was so deeply rooted in their culture? Or were the biblical writers themselves not fully aware of the implications of the principles they themselves enunciated? However we answer these questions, it does seem to me that Frame's response to Webb raises a larger systemic issue in the formulation of "biblical ethics." Frame, to his credit, seeks to be explicitly and thoroughly "biblical." But is it possible to define "biblical" so much in terms of the explicit commands of Scripture that one fails to deal seriously enough with some of the "trajectories" of broader Scriptural teaching? Might not those very trajectories assist us in deciding which commands are culturally oriented and which are transcultural?

Law, Grace, and Gospel

As I have noted, Frame decides to describe the Christian life in terms of the “normative” perspective, focusing on the Lordship of God as it comes to bear on us in the authority of biblical law. Let me say again that Frame is very clear about the fact that this perspective is not the only one and that it must be balanced by, and informed by, the situational and the existential perspectives. But Frame is clearly convinced that the normative perspective is valuable in guarding against the greater potential for subjectivity in the other perspectives. Frame wants to hear a word from God and base Christian conduct on that sure and authoritative word. Surely, in an age that is in danger of sinking into utter moral chaos, Frame’s approach has much to be said for it. The tendency toward subjectivity invades the Christian church as well, of course. One of the delights of Frame’s book—even if it sometimes perplexes the non-Reformed reader looking in from the outside—is its taking up of certain specific issues from the world that Frame inhabits. In a chapter dealing with redemptive history as an aspect of the situational perspective, then, we come upon a seven-page criticism of preachers who focus on redemptive history and the narrative of Scripture at the expense of its moral examples (pp. 290–97). Frame suggests that the fascination with redemptive history in the contemporary academy has created an imbalance in preaching, in which preachers avoid holding up biblical characters as moral examples out of a concern to avoid “moralism.” While I am not acquainted with this particular debate, I share what seems to be Frame’s concern that a renewed emphasis on the redemptive-historical and narrative dimension in Scripture can go too far and push out other important dimensions of the text.

Frame’s focus on law as the basis for biblical ethics has much to be said for it. He rightly recognizes the fact that Scripture confronts believers with authoritative demands from God, demands that cannot be relativized away with a vague appeal to love or to the difficulties of

situations that we find ourselves in. But I do wonder whether the overall focus of what the “Christian life” is all about becomes skewed in this way of presenting the matter.

While clearly and repeatedly emphasizing the importance of the existential perspective in his book, I question whether this perspective—the transformation of Christian character focus—is given the systematic attention it needs to have in a book with the title *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*. Frame offers a telling confession in his last, very short, chapter on “Personal Spiritual Maturity,” claiming that he is no specialist in the “doctrine of sanctification or in the disciplines of what is now called ‘spiritual formation’” (p. 911). Now I am sure that Frame is simply being modest here. But the confession does point up the fact that this book on the Christian life does not in my view adequately attend to the NT emphasis on the internal transformation of the Christian by means of the powerful influence of God’s Spirit. Frame is quite right to note that obedience to the commands of God remains an important emphasis in the New Testament. Yet it seems to me that, in comparison with the OT, the focus shifts a bit in the New Testament. With “the law written on the heart,” the new covenant believer is not only given a new power to do what God commands but also to discern, by means of a “renewed mind,” just what it is that God wishes us to do in the various situation of our lives. “Law,” in some sense, is still necessary to guide the believer. But, I would suggest, obedience to “law” in the New Testament becomes, in a sense secondary, the objective signposts about the will of God that still sinful Christians continue to need as they focus on the primary task of transforming their thinking and their values in accordance with the “mind of Christ.” Frame’s book focuses on the “what” of the Christian life at the expense of the “why.” I understand his concern about what can happen when we separate too rigidly “law” and “gospel.” Yet it does seem to me that, in the New Testament at least, the Christian life is tied more firmly to grace and gospel than it is to law.

The Decalogue

Frame uses the Decalogue as the means by which to expedit the nature of the Christian life. Almost half the book is given to a careful exposition and application of the Ten Commandments. Of course, Frame's decision to focus on the Decalogue has good precedent in the Reformation tradition, imitating the catechisms of Luther and many Reformed confessions. And, like his predecessors, Frame finds in the Decalogue principles of ethical behavior that are wide-ranging in their implications, touching on every dimension of human life. Yet many of you who know of my work on the law will not be surprised that I have some questions to raise about this approach.

Frame claims, "The whole church has recognized that the Decalogue remains normative for us, with the exception, according to some, of the fourth commandment" (p. 204). If Frame means by this that all Christians recognize that the Decalogue, as part of Scripture, remains in some sense authoritative for Christians, then, of course, he is right. Yet by admitting the exception of the Sabbath command, Frame seems to be claiming more: that all Christians recognize that the Decalogue continues to have "normative" ethical authority over Christians. This, of course, is not true—as I suspect Frame knows. Many solidly orthodox theologians and biblical interpreters have argued that the Decalogue, as "old covenant" law, is no longer the normative ethical source for new covenant believers. So perhaps Frame means simply that the specific activities prohibited in nine of the ten commandments continue to be forbidden to new covenant believers—a point that indeed can be sustained.

But his choice to use the Decalogue as his basis for outlining Christian ethics suggests more than this: that the Decalogue continues to function for the Christian as an authoritative summary of biblical ethics. If so, however, and considering the differing views of the Decalogue

among Christian theologians, it is surprising that Frame does not do more to justify this selection. As I mentioned at the outset of this review, Frame is writing very self-consciously in the Reformed tradition. He has clearly made the decision to assume quite a lot about that tradition. And, of course, anyone writing on so vast a subject has to make hard decisions about what to assume and what needs to be argued. However, by spending so little time on validating his decision to use the Decalogue as the key source for Christian ethics, Frame will leave unconvinced at a fundamental methodological level those many readers, like myself, who do not accept his assumption about the relationship of the Mosaic law and the Christian. Frame regularly cites Jesus's teaching in Matthew 5 both to validate a continuing normative role for the law and to justify his broad principial interpretation of the Decalogue. But nowhere does he explain why he thinks Matthew 5 teaches these points. New Testament interpreters take several different views about the meaning of "fulfill" in 5:17 and the relationship of Jesus' teaching to the commandments from the law that he quotes in this passage—and the view that Frame assumes is not the most popular option among interpreters. Frame does deal briefly with Paul's claim that believers are not "under the law," relying for his interpretation of this point, as he does in a number of places, on the work of John Murray. I am myself unconvinced by Frame—or Murray—but I applaud his attempt to deal with this evidence. I wish that Frame had followed through at this point on his *sola Scriptura* focus by rooting his decision about the place of the Decalogue for the Christian life more solidly in the New Testament.

Frame's attempt to find virtually the whole of Christian ethics within the Decalogue might also be questioned from an internal perspective. As I mentioned, the tradition of finding within, or behind, the explicit prohibitions of specific activities in the Decalogue wide-ranging principles has a long history. Frame locates himself explicitly in that history by frequently citing

the interpretation of the Decalogue in the Westminster Confession of Faith. To his credit, Frame is not content simply to cite the Confession or the broader Reformed tradition of interpretation. True to his principle of *sola Scriptura*, he seeks to ground all his interpretation in the teaching of the Bible elsewhere. Yet I sometimes wonder whether the tail begins wagging the dog: whether Frame goes to Scripture to find confirmation for an interpretive approach that he has already found in the tradition. Of course, we all do this to some extent. But I do not find Frame's scriptural justification for all his expansive interpretations to be justified. Let me take the fifth command, to honor one's father and mother, as an example.

Frame, following Westminster, ultimately finds in this commandment a requirement to honor not only parents, but also "all superiors in age or gifts," and, indeed, inferiors and equals as well. God here commands us, according to Frame, to honor everyone. But the question in my mind is still this: How do we know that a command to honor everyone is validly a part of the command to honor our parents? As far as I can see, Frame adduces no biblical arguments that would support so extensive a meaning of the commandment. His strongest argument is that, in his view, the family is the sphere from which all other relationships are derived. But this argument cannot be used to conclude that anytime the Scripture speaks of the family it is therefore also speaking of all these other relationships. Certainly the NT citation of this commandment never hints at such an expansion of "father and mother" (Matt 15:4=Mark 10:7; Matt 19:18–19=Mark 10:19=Luke 18:20; Eph 6:2–3). Moreover, one wonders what the word "honor" ends up meaning on this interpretation—if, indeed, it ends up meaning anything specifically. For a parent to "honor" a child is surely very different than a child honoring a parent.

It seems to me that what is actually happening in this kind of appeal to the Decalogue is that it ends up being a normative framework for the discussion of biblical ethics: a kind of funnel through which all the teaching of Scripture about a person's ethical duties can be run. Indeed, Frame suggests that this is the case by admitting that specific commandments of the Decalogue might change in their application (p. 205). And one might wonder at this point what all the fuss is about. Why not use the Decalogue as a framework within which to outline Christian ethics?

The problem, as I see it, is not so much what Frame does by using the Decalogue as his normative framework but what he does not do. In his justification for the priority of the Decalogue in his sketch of Christian ethics, Frame argues for its "hermeneutical centrality" and says this: "When we think about God's standards for ethics, therefore, we should look especially at parts of the Bible that are specifically and directly concerned with that. There is, of course, much teaching about ethics in the New Testament, but it tends to be unsystematic, and it is mainly concerned with the outworkings of salvation in Christ, rather than with defining right and wrong" (p. 390). Maybe it is just because I am a New Testament scholar: but I have a bit of a problem with this depreciation of the significance of the New Testament for the Christian's ethical reasoning. For this is a book not about "ethics" but about the Christian life. The reality of redemptive history means that the New Testament may advance our understanding of biblical ethics and provides the hermeneutical lens through which the whole Bible is to be read. The New Testament is, indeed, focused on the "outworkings of salvation in Christ"; but, in my view, this is precisely what the "Christian life" is. Those "outworkings" include specific commands and prohibitions, of which we have many in the New Testament. But prior to these specific commands and prohibitions, and grounding them, are certain key new covenant realities and values that, in my view, should have pride of place in a book on the Christian life: the imitation

of Christ, the fundamental values that flow from the cross and the resurrection, the powerful transforming work of the Spirit.

It is easy to single out a sentence or two from any book and subject it to criticism: who of us has not written sentences—nay, paragraphs, perhaps even chapters!—that well deserve the criticism heaped upon them. But these two sentences prioritizing the Decalogue over the New Testament encapsulate my hesitations about Frame’s approach in *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*. The book is an admirable, biblically rich, and very satisfying exploration of the meaning, implications, and practical contemporary outworking of biblical law through the lens of the Decalogue. I learned a lot from it. I was challenged in my own too often superficial level of Christian obedience. And it is an important counterbalance to those who err on the side of turning Christian ethics into a vacuous and undefined call to love one another. But at the end of the day, by not focusing enough attention on the grand New Testament themes of Christ’s lordship, the work of the Holy Spirit, and the transformation of mind and heart in conformity with Christ, the book did not satisfy me as a whole and balanced description of the Christian life.