

*THE ROLE OF THE TRINITY IN JOHN FRAME'S APOLOGETICS*

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*A PAPER*

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## *Introductory Considerations*

I consider it a privilege to be writing about John Frame, whose work has impacted my thinking, ministry and teaching dramatically. When I embarked on this journey, I wanted to make sure I would be contributing something original to the field of discourse in apologetics and evangelism. I had been formally studying apologetics for four years, and, while I was a relative novice to Frame's work at the time, I knew enough to know that I wanted to know more. It seemed that no one was currently working on anything significant addressing Frame or his work,<sup>1</sup> so it seemed like a good opportunity both to learn and to contribute something significant and original.

I investigated Frame's apologetics, triperspectivalism, and teaching regarding the Trinity. Frame's approach to apologetics is triperspectival, and his triperspectivalism is revolutionary, but whence does it spring? Is its threeness related to the threeness of the Trinity, or is that a coincidence? Is triperspectivalism an ontological presupposition about the world? Is it a biblical hermeneutic? Is it a useful pedagogical tool only? How relevant is it to areas outside academia? I had many questions, but my principle research question is, "What is the role of Trinitarian theology in John Frame's apologetics?"<sup>2</sup>

My thesis shall be, Trinitarian theology provides the criterion, shapes the methodology and defines the motivation for Frame's apologetics. To begin with, I shall discuss some terms key to understanding Frame's approach to theology in general and apologetics in particular. I shall define relevant terms, and then I shall expound on my thesis in three interrelated sections:

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<sup>1</sup> Vanhoozer in an email message to the author, 18 August, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> This question was suggested by Dr. Kevin Vanhoozer in an e-mail message to the author, August 17, 2016. N.B. I found myself talking quite a lot about Frame and presuppositionalism over the several weeks I spent in research. Some scoffed at the idea that researching presuppositionalist like Frame would yield anything of value, but, sensing the bulverism in that, pressed on.

the criterion of apologetics, the methodology of apologetics, and the motivation for doing apologetics. Finally, I shall conclude by discussing some implications of my findings and some recommendations.

### *A Few Key Terms*

Before we can answer what the role of Trinitarian theology is in Frame's apologetics, we need to define some general terms as Frame uses them. The terms I will define will be: theology, Trinity, triperspectivalism, and epistemology. Then I will explain what Frame says about apologetics in particular.

#### Theology

How does Frame define theology? He says theology is "the application of God's words by persons to all areas of life;<sup>3</sup> it is about meeting human needs, and its job is, "to help people understand the Bible better."<sup>4</sup> For Frame, "all [good] theology is practical..."<sup>5</sup> So theology is about helping persons understand the Bible better, in order to apply it practically to the every need of life. For Frame, theology does not precede application; theology *is* application.

#### Trinity

What does Frame say about the Trinity? In short, he says a lot. But I will focus on three aspects of what he writes concerning Trinitarian doctrine, namely the ontological Trinity, the economic Trinity, and human limitations in comprehending the Trinity.

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<sup>3</sup> John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1987), 76.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

### *The Ontological Trinity*

In God's nature, He is, "both one and complex."<sup>6</sup> God is one--one substance, one essence, one being.<sup>7</sup> And yet God is also three *hypostases*; three divine *hypostases* (Persons) make up the Godhead.<sup>8</sup> Frame is careful to note that, while the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are related to one another in something like a triperspectival way, they are not *merely* perspectives on one another,<sup>9</sup> which would be Sabellianism.<sup>10</sup> We know this from Scripture; there are transactions between the three Persons.<sup>11</sup>

There have been two major conceptions of how the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are related to one another. Augustine and others held to the psychological Trinity model, which, of the two, Frame prefers.<sup>12</sup> Cornelius Van Til, the Cappadocians and many today espouse the social Trinitarian model.<sup>13</sup>

The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are "in" one another (circumincession) and love one another (perichoresis). The three persons of the Trinity are distinctive from one another, "Yet," Frame says, "their distinctness is an odd kind of distinctness."<sup>14</sup>

### *The Economic Trinity*

How do the Persons of the Trinity relate in their role and work? There is union of all

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<sup>6</sup> John M. Frame, *Theology in Three Dimensions* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2017), 19.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Speaking the Truth in Love: The Theology of John M. Frame*, John J. Hughes, ed. (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2009), 43, also, John M. Frame, e-mail message to the author, November 19, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, also, John M. Frame, in an e-mail message to the author, November 19, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> TTD, 19.

<sup>12</sup> STL, 28.

<sup>13</sup> John M. Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology*, (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2015), 113.

<sup>14</sup> John M. Frame, in an e-mail message to the author, November 19, 2016.

three persons in God's works *ad extra*.<sup>15</sup> Each person bears the whole divine nature. Whatever one person does, the other persons also play a role (creation, redemption)."<sup>16</sup> "Each works 'in' the other two, so that nothing happens without all three working together. But the involvement of each is distinct and appropriate."<sup>17</sup>

The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are each associated with a particular role, one of each of Frame's three perspectives<sup>18</sup> and with one of Frame's lordship attributes.<sup>19</sup> But how are the individual roles of the Trinitarian persons decided? This is not by chance, Frame maintains.<sup>20</sup> He says,

The traditional way of understanding their distinction, "is by talking about eternal generation/procession and the resulting 'personal properties:' the Father is unbegotten, the Son begotten but not processing, etc. But although I accept these formulations, they seem to be no more than metaphorical expansion of the names Father, Son, and Spirit. I think we must go on from there and see how the economic differences of the persons may indicate ontological distinctions."<sup>21</sup>

Frame believes there is, "is something about the persons of the Father, Son, and Spirit that made it appropriate for them to take on the economic roles they did."<sup>22</sup> He sees a correlation between the three divine Persons and what he identifies as the three lordship attributes of God:

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> John M. Frame, in an e-mail message to the author, December 12, 2016.

<sup>19</sup> John M. Frame, in an e-mail message to the author, November 19, 2016.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

authority, control, and presence. While Father, Son and Holy Spirit are unified in their work and being, nevertheless each of them is associated especially with one of the lordship attributes.

The Father is the authority, “is the one who formulates the plan for nature and history.”<sup>23</sup>

The Son is the “executive power, who accomplishes the Father’s will.”<sup>24</sup> He is the “mover of history” associated with the attribute of control. Frame says, “In his incarnate life, the Son commits himself to following that plan and that plan only.”<sup>25</sup>

The Holy Spirit, then, is associated with the attribute of presence. The Holy Spirit is God’s indwelling presence with his people, and the one who applies the Father’s plan and the Son’s work to the lives of the elect.<sup>26</sup>

Is Frame an eternal subordinationist--does he believe the Father is greater than the Son and the Holy Spirit? No.<sup>27</sup> The “association of the Father with ‘authority’” does not place him in a superior position than the Son or the Holy Spirit.

“Rather,” he says, “Scripture considers service to be a mark of godliness, indeed of superiority (Matt. 20).”<sup>28</sup> So the Son’s “acceptance of the Father’s task to the point of death is a mark of his supreme dignity.”<sup>29</sup> (John M. Frame, in an e-mail message to the author, November 19, 2016.)

Rather than viewing the divine Persons hierarchically, Frame suggests we think of them triperspectively; the three are equally ultimate.<sup>30</sup> The Divine Persons taking on the roles that

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> TTD, 19-20.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> John M. Frame, in an e-mail message to the author, November 19, 2016.

<sup>27</sup> Frame discusses this in AJCB, 43-46.

<sup>28</sup> John M. Frame, in an e-mail message to the author, November 19, 2016.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> DKG, 265-266.

they did, “does not involve ontological subordination. The three persons and their three works are utterly equal, equally worthy of praise.”<sup>31</sup>

### *Human Limitations in Comprehending the Trinity*

We are fallen, fallible, and finite so we may not comprehend the Trinity fully.<sup>32</sup> We can go only so far as Scripture itself goes and no further.<sup>33</sup> In fact, Frame goes so far as to suggest that perhaps we need to give up the pursuit of a fully comprehensive Trinitarian model.<sup>34</sup> He admires Van Til’s unabashed formulation, which flew in the face of efforts to make the Trinitarian theology free of apparent contradictions and paradox.<sup>35</sup>

The paradox of the Trinity has two chief effects. First, it curbs human intellectual pride.<sup>36</sup> And second, it calls us to faith in the absence of a clear and comprehensive explanation. Scripture says God is One; Scripture says God is Three, and it does not explain how this is. As Christians, whose fundamental presupposition is the truth of Scripture, we receive it by faith.

### Presuppositions

A presupposition is “A belief over which no other takes precedence,” a “basic commitment of the heart.”<sup>37</sup> All thinking, feeling and intentions have their basis in

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<sup>31</sup> John M. Frame, in an e-mail message to the author, November 19, 2016.

<sup>32</sup> HWPT, 111

<sup>33</sup> For a discussion on whether the paradoxes inherent in Christian theology necessitate a kind of irrationalism beyond the bare claims of Scripture, see John M. Frame, *John M. Frame’s Selected Shorter Writings*, Vol. 2 (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2016), 239-240.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. HWPT, 113

<sup>35</sup> Van Til said, “God is one,” and “God is three” and did not always clarify in what sense God was either.

<sup>36</sup> John M. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought*, (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1995), 70.

<sup>37</sup> DKG, 125.

presuppositions; there can be no neutrality. Nor can there be any reasoning from brute facts.<sup>38</sup>

All facts in the world are works of God, that clarify the meaning of and demonstrate the truth of his word.<sup>39</sup> This revelation can only be properly understood when viewed from biblical presuppositions. Reasoning is vindicated when “Jesus is Lord is a heart commitment rather than a mere proposition.”<sup>40</sup>

The first duty of the apologete, then, is to recognize that there is always a foundation of presuppositions underlying our reasoning. We have all done thinking “prior to inquiry.”<sup>41</sup> Frame explains, “our assumptions limit our inquiry,” and our inquiry in turn, “corrects and refines our assumptions.”<sup>42</sup>

What presuppositions does Frame view as foundational to the Christian worldview?<sup>43</sup>

### *Biblicism*

Frame says he subscribes to “something close to biblicism.”<sup>44</sup> This means that, when the apologete wants to prove the authority of Scripture can appeal to nothing more basic than Scripture itself. There is no presupposition more basic. The authority of Scripture must never be abandoned (Frame cites Scriptures in support of this point: Rom. 3:4; 12:3; Col. 1:17; Prov. 1:7; Psalm 111:10; Prov. 9:10).<sup>45</sup> The revelation of God revealed in the Bible is the most basic presupposition for the apologete;<sup>46</sup> all apologetics must be based on Scriptural reasoning.<sup>47</sup> And

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<sup>38</sup> DKG, 147.

<sup>39</sup> DKG, 148.

<sup>40</sup> STL, 494.

<sup>41</sup> Frame, John M, “Presuppositional Apologetics,” May 23, 2012, [www.Frame-Poythress.org](http://www.Frame-Poythress.org).

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. STL 157

<sup>44</sup> Frame, John M, “In Defense of Something Close to Biblicism,” June 4, 2012, [www.Frame-Poythress.org](http://www.Frame-Poythress.org).

<sup>45</sup> Frame, John M, “Presuppositional Apologetics,” May 23, 2012, [www.Frame-Poythress.org](http://www.Frame-Poythress.org).

<sup>46</sup> John M. Frame, *John M. Frame’s Selected Shorter Writings*, Vol. 1 (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing,

what is the message of the Bible? That question has two answers--one for the Old Testament and one for the New Testament. The message of the OT is, "God is Lord." And the message of the NT is, "Jesus is Lord."<sup>48</sup>

Behind all reality is the tripersonal God of Scripture. This is key to understanding Frame's triperspectivalism and apologetics, and I discuss this below. So the presupposition behind it all is, "The God of the Bible is the Creator and Lord of all, and has been revealed in Jesus Christ by the word of God written."<sup>49</sup> Every epistemological claim depends on a lordship commitment<sup>50</sup> --either the human self is thought to be autonomous (Lord), or the Lordship of the God of Scripture is presupposed, and the apologete commits to his lordship.

"So the apologetic argument (even when arguing for the authority of Scripture), like all human inquiries into truth, must presuppose the truth of God's word" as the ultimate authority.<sup>51</sup> The Bible, as Frame likes to say (echoing the Reformers), is the *norma normans non normata*--the norm of norms which cannot be normed.

Apologetes arguing in this presuppositional way will need to be prepared to respond to charges of circularity.<sup>52</sup> To respond to this charge, the apologete should recognize that all arguments are circular. However, broadly circular arguments are better than narrowly circular ones. Appeals to authority in this way, done broadly circularly, are not problematic--when the authority is the Bible.<sup>53</sup> God created us to reason, and to reason Christianly in a circular way. The

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2016), 177.

<sup>47</sup> CVT, 116.

<sup>48</sup> STL, 3.

<sup>49</sup> STL 492.

<sup>50</sup> STL, 492.

<sup>51</sup> Frame, John M, "Presuppositional Apologetics," May 23, 2012, [www.Frame-Poythress.org](http://www.Frame-Poythress.org).

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> DKG, 292.

unbeliever reasons in a narrowly circular way, defending his autonomous reason on the basis of his autonomous reason. The Christian, on the other hand, presupposes God's revelation as the highest law of thought.<sup>54</sup> Ever the Van Tillian, Frame says, "For a Christian, the content of Scripture must serve as his ultimate presupposition."<sup>55</sup>

So the Christian reasons in a broad circle, from God's word out into the world of facts and human existence and back to God's word. Only grace can bring us from one circle to another.<sup>56</sup>

### *The Creator-Creature Distinction*

The Creator-Creature distinction is crucial to Frame's epistemology (and therefore to his apologetics) as it was to Van Til.

The Trinity is a necessary conclusion from biblical study, therefore God is absolute tripersonality. This fact undergirds all reality, and therefore all knowledge about reality reflects God's tripersonality and is impossible without it.

There is only one God--and certainly only one that the Christian apologete is interested in proving--the triune God revealed in Scripture. God's existence is, "the fact from whom all other facts derive their meaning and intelligibility." The Christian's understanding of God's special revelation is the normative perspective to all of life.<sup>57</sup> Therefore it makes sense that predication depends on the triune God. It is impossible to say that any state of affairs obtains without "referentially presupposing the truth of the proposition, 'God exists.'"<sup>58</sup> *Not-God* implies *not-x*,

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>55</sup> DKG, 45.

<sup>56</sup> Frame, John M, "Presuppositional Apologetics," May 23, 2012, [www.Frame-Poythress.org](http://www.Frame-Poythress.org).

<sup>57</sup> STL, 118.

<sup>58</sup> STL, 465.

with x being any state of affairs.

So every statement of predication (affirming a state of affairs) has the invisible prefix in front of it, “Because God, therefore,....”<sup>59</sup> And since God is triune, we might say instead, “Because the triune God, therefore,....”

### Epistemology

Knowledge of the triune God is a necessary starting point for knowledge of anything else (cf. Proverbs 1:7). All knowledge is from God, and He reveals knowledge in a three-fold way. Frame says in DKG, “Thus the origin of knowledge is Trinitarian: the Father knows all and reveals truth to us by the grace of His Son through the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.”<sup>60</sup> Similarly, God is the source of all wisdom, which is also revealed triperspectivally: the Father is the source of wisdom. In the Son are hidden all the treasures of wisdom. And the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Wisdom.<sup>61</sup>

Perhaps Frame’s greatest contribution to the field of epistemology (and apologetics) is his multiperspectivalism. Frame says that knowledge is perspectival.<sup>62</sup> Vern Poythress, frequent collaborator with Frame, defines a perspective as “(1) a view of something (2) by someone (3) from somewhere.”<sup>63</sup> Triperspectivalism deals with three perspectives (naturally), and each perspective “contains all reality, as an angle from which all reality can be understood.”<sup>64</sup> Frame’s three perspectives are the normative, the situational and the existential, and these are vital to his

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 469

<sup>60</sup> DKG, 42.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>62</sup> DKG, 108.

<sup>63</sup> TTD, 6

<sup>64</sup> TTD, 23

view of knowledge. The perspectives are not “parts” of knowledge, but rather they are three different ways of looking at the same world, the same states of affairs.

As knowers, we are subjects--and Frame maintains that everything is therefore “subject,” because everything we know is ultimately something in our own minds. On the other hand, everything is “object,” since everything can be known.

How can we know if we, as subjects, are justified in holding a belief--if we have the ethical right or obligation to believe it? How do we know whether we “know” something (an important question to the apologete to ask prior to beginning the apologetic discourse with an unbeliever!)? Frame’s perspectives provide some questions to help us determine the answer: Does the belief accord with the laws of thought and with Scripture? Does it meet the evidence? Does it meet our needs, as a subject, as defined by Scripture?

### *Theistic Epistemology*

Frame’s epistemology is also theistic in a way that could only work within biblical Christianity. I discuss the relationship between the perspectives and the Trinity below. Yet before looking at that connection, we can see how Frame’s view of knowledge is only possible on the presupposition of the biblical God--the God who is Ultimate Personality.<sup>65</sup> God creates the facts of the world, such that they can be understood only according to his established norms. He reveals his norms by his word, which is his revelation. And he creates human beings in such a way that they are able to understand the facts of creation according to the norms he has created. There is a remarkable correspondence between the world and the human mind, when it functions according to the Creator’s norms. Here we recall Scripture’s teaching that “the fear of the Lord is

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<sup>65</sup> Really, ultimate tri-personality, as we will discuss later.

the beginning” of both “wisdom” and “knowledge” (Proverbs 1:7; 9:10).

### Triperspectivalism

Frame’s epistemology is thoroughly triperspectival. By my lights, he has discovered something that epistemology has flirted with for years--the threefold nature of knowledge. Even the historic definition of knowledge used by philosophers, *viz.* “justified true belief,” smacks of triperspectivalism.<sup>66</sup> Alvin Plantinga, known for his so-called Reformed Epistemology, defines belief as being “warranted” to the extent that the subject’s faculties are functioning properly, in an environment conducive to the truth-seeking enterprise.<sup>67</sup> We might make the case that Plantinga’s epistemology, while different from Frame’s,<sup>68</sup> is triperspectival too: properly functioning faculties (existential) in a conducive environment (situational) providing degrees of warrant (normative).

### *Mutually-Inclusive Perspectives*

I will admit that one aspect of Frame’s triperspectivalism that confused me at first is the idea that the three perspectives all include one another. As he puts it,

“(1) The facts (situational) include the norms and the mind: minds and norms are among the factual objects about which we seek knowledge. (2) The mind (existential) includes the facts and the norms: for we know facts and norms only through our minds. The facts and norms are what

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<sup>66</sup> STL, 443.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 445.

<sup>68</sup> In that Plantinga deals with properly-basic beliefs, which are “defeasible,” over against Frame-Van Til’s presuppositions, which cannot be given up without giving up the entire worldview they support. I am indebted to my brother, Parker Settecase, for reminding me of that distinction in discussion with the author, December 18, 2016.

the mind acknowledges to be facts and norms. (3) And... the norms (normative) define what the facts are and the proper workings of the mind in identifying them.”<sup>69</sup>

When we look through the normative window, we see the same “house” as we would have seen, had we looked through the situational or the existential windows. The state of affairs being observed is the same. This is what I believe Frame is getting at when he says the perspectives include each other.

Of course, Frame’s triperspectivalism is not limited to epistemology. All creation, it turns out, has a “threeness” to it, and may be observed triperspectivally. Even triperspectivalism itself is supported by a triad of pillars: God’s authority (expressed in revelation, by which He establishes the nature of reality), God’s direction of history (by which he maintains consistency and brings the story to his desired, good, God-glorifying conclusion), and the *imago dei* (by which persons experience and interact with triperspectival reality).

No one perspective is prior to the others; the three are equally ultimate<sup>70</sup> (in this way, the perspectives are like the Persons of the Trinity, which I elaborate on below). The perspectives of knowledge are how persons access the truth. Truth is infallible, but there is no such thing as brute truth, or to put it in a more Framean way, “brute facts.” We access truth through the normative, experiential (situational) and existential perspectives.<sup>71</sup>

The triperspectival framework answers numerous questions about God’s works in God’s world. For example, the question of what comes first in God’s plan, as well as the problem of concretion and abstraction are both answered when the matters are viewed triperspectivally. I

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<sup>69</sup> TTD 38

<sup>70</sup> DKG, 163

<sup>71</sup> SSW1, 184.

will not explore these matters at this time, but perhaps some other intrepid Framean theologian will pick up the topic of, “metaphysical problems solved by Frame’s triperspectivalism. Suffice it to say, that if this is God’s world (as it is), and God has created the world to reflect his triune nature (as He apparently has), then should we not expect that a three-perspective epistemological approach would answer questions about reality that are unanswerable by any other scheme? Indeed we should.

### *Triperspectivalism’s Logic of Discovery*

So where did triperspectivalism come from? Or, since that question could be simply answered, “God,” perhaps it would be better to ask, “How did Frame discover triperspectivalism?” And for the purposes of this paper, I was interested in discovering whether--and how much--triperspectivalism was connected with the triune nature of God. Is triperspectivalism simply a useful pedagogical tool? Is it a biblical hermeneutic, in which case it would not necessarily need to be grounded in the Trinity?<sup>72</sup> Or is there something deeper behind it--some ontological condition about reality itself by which it expresses itself in a triadic way? If it were the latter, then triperspectivalism would be much more likely to be bound up with the Trinity. And in that case, since Frame’s apologetics are triperspectival, it would dramatically impact effect of Trinitarian theology his apologetics.

By Frame’s own accounting, his development of triperspectivalism was a stream that flowed from various headwaters:

The *immediate* sources were (1) Van Til’s distinction between goal, standard, and motive in his

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<sup>72</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer, in discussion with the author, November 30, 2016.

*Christian-Theistic Ethics*. (2) His distinction between God, nature, and self as the sources of natural revelation in his *Intro to Systematic Theology*. (3) Ed Clowney's pyramid diagram of the structure of the Church, following the biblical offices of Christ, prophet/priest/king. (4) Various philosophical speculations on subject, object, and norm. Then came Vern Poythress, who tied my triads to Kenneth Pike's Tagmemic language theory (particle, wave, field, and other triads). That's when it occurred to me that we had hold of something here that could be more than a bit of theological pedagogy.<sup>73</sup>

Notably, Frame did not mention the Trinity as one of the sources that contributed to his discovery of triperspectivalism. However, after the framework had been developed, would he consider the Trinity to be part of its logic of justification?<sup>74</sup> Is the Trinity evidence for triperspectivalism's validity, truth or cogency? Is it perhaps the other way around, and the triperspectival nature of so much of reality (all of reality?) is evidence for the triune nature of God?

#### *Triperspectivalism's Logic of Justification, and Its Implications for Epistemology*

Frame responds to these questions directly, conveying the impact of the truth of the Trinity on the nature of our epistemology. He says, "Given the truth of the doctrine of the Trinity, everything else we believe has got to be reconciled with it. So if any theory of theology, science, history, philosophy, etc. conflicts with the doctrine of the Trinity, the doctrine must prevail, and what contradicts it must be rejected." In other words, we as Christians must return to our presuppositions. If we take the Bible's portrayal of God as unquestionably true (and we can do nothing less, and still remain orthodox), then the Creator of all created reality is both Three

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<sup>73</sup> John M. Frame, in an e-mail message to the author, November 19, 2016.

<sup>74</sup> This question was suggested by Kevin Vanhoozer, in discussion with the author, November 30, 2016.

and One.

By virtue of our monotheism, then, it behooves us to ask about every fact, “What does God have to do with this fact?”<sup>75</sup> Accordingly, our Trinitarianism requires us to ask, “What do the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit each have to do with this fact?”<sup>76</sup> Frame believes that, “the three persons operate (at least ad extra) as authority, situation and presence,” and therefore, “you need to ask how every fact serves these divine roles, if you are going to understand the fact properly.”<sup>77</sup>

This way of thinking about every state of affairs in creation recalls the Van Tillian idea that predication is impossible without God.<sup>78</sup> All this to say, Christian epistemology needs to be triperspectival, and fully take into account what Scripture reveals about the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Multiperspectivalism is not a denial of the Doctrine of Sola Scriptura. This is because of how seriously the Christian, thinking multiperspectivally, takes Scripture as his norm for interpreting all the data gathered through the other two perspectives. As well, it turns out that triperspectivalism is biblical,<sup>79</sup> and it is a reflection of the triune God the Bible reveals.

So Frame posits that Christian epistemology must be thoroughly biblical and triperspectival. But is triperspectivalism explicitly rooted in the Trinity?

“In the early days,” Frame relates, “I presented triperspectivalism as a pedagogical

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<sup>75</sup> John M. Frame, in an e-mail message to the author, December 3, 2016.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> John M. Frame, in an e-mail message to the author, December 3, 2016..

<sup>78</sup> STL 465; cf. p. 492.

<sup>79</sup> Beyond the triune nature of the God of Scripture, Frame offers these passages as biblical evidence for triperspectivalism in STL, 643-647: Normative: 1 Jn. 4:1-3; Deut. 13:1-5; 1 Cor. 2:2; Col. 1:23, 26; Phil 1:7, 12, 16, 14, 15-18; Hebrews 1-4; Acts 17:22-36. Existential: Isa. 6:1-13; Ezek. 1:4-3:15; Jn. 14:18, 26, 28; Saul’s conversion (1 Tim. 1:13-16); 1 Tim. 4:16; 2 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:6-9 (Character)--I imitate Christ (Phil. 3:17); 1 Cor. 11:1; Titus 2:7. Situational: OT diversity and even NT diversity of authorship, occasion, milieu, etc.

device--a group of hooks for hanging various theological proposals.”<sup>80</sup> Over time, he came to see just how parallel the hooks were. He realized he could present it as a hermeneutic, “a way of arranging and presenting the various doctrines of systematics.”<sup>81</sup> But it came to seem “almost too easy. There always seemed to be three of whatever we were discussing.”<sup>82</sup>

He began to realize this was more than a pedagogy or hermeneutic, “but that there was something more fundamental located beneath the surface.” He explains his thought process: “Now with all these threes bouncing around, it was obvious that they might have something to do with the Trinity. Of course, as Van Tillians, we often talked about the Trinity as “the answer to the problem of the one and the many.”<sup>83</sup> As it turns out, the Triune nature of God *is absolutely* the ground for triperspectivalism: “I now believe that fundamental [located beneath the surface] is the ontological Trinity.”<sup>84</sup> The doctrine of the triune Creator points as evidence to the threeness baked in to his creation. And the triperspectival nature of the universe points back to the truth of the doctrine of the Trinity. “So,” summarizes Frame, “the ‘evidence chain’ works both ways.”<sup>85</sup>

All of creation reflects God’s lordship attributes of control, authority and presence. Each of God’s lordship attributes is associated with one of the perspectives. And each of the divine Persons is associated (primarily, though certainly not exclusively) with one of the three lordship attributes. In this way, our knowledge about the universe, entered into via the three perspectives (normative, situational and existential) directly reflects the Father, Son and Holy Spirit behind creation. “...OF COURSE the Trinity is fundamental to the nature of reality,” Frame writes

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<sup>80</sup> John M. Frame, in an e-mail message to the author, December 3, 2016.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> John M. Frame, in an e-mail message to the author, November 19, 2016.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> John M. Frame, in an e-mail message to the author, December 3, 2016.

emphatically, “because God is Triune, and God is fundamental to the nature of reality.”<sup>86</sup>

So triperspectivalism is bound up with metaphysics and ontology. God’s creation is triadic. And all knowledge about creation must come from revelation, a word from God. Thought of triperspectivally, the Father is the speaker of the message; the Son is the word, and the Spirit is, “the breath that conveys the word to its destination.”<sup>87</sup> The triadic nature is revealed in redemptive history, for instance, in the Exodus, during which Yahweh sent plagues on Pharaoh (control, the situational perspective), gave the Law to Israel (as the authority, the normative perspective), and kindly guided Israel in the wilderness (presence, the existential perspective). A robust, biblical understanding of the world, “will have a triperspectival aspect to it. Because the whole creation is the work of our Triune God. Everything reveals God’s norms, the facts He has created, and the inner life of the person who seeks to understand.”<sup>88</sup> Trinitarian theology provides the paradigm for understanding every fact.<sup>89</sup>

The Trinity is both the reason for why reality is the way it is (metaphysics and ontology), as well as the ground for understanding reality (epistemology and value theory). God’s triune nature is reflected in the nature of reality, the nature of persons, and the correspondence between them. So, beginning to think apologetically, we can prove the Trinity (for example) by showing that no fact makes sense without presupposing the Trinity.

So the ‘evidence’ chain works both ways.<sup>90</sup> The Trinity, “is evidence for a triperspectival understanding.<sup>91</sup> [And]...a triperspectival understanding of reality presupposes (and therefore

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid. (emphasis his).

<sup>87</sup> TTD, 19.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>89</sup> DKG, 100

<sup>90</sup> John M. Frame, in an e-mail message to the author, December 3, 2016.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

proves) the Trinity. I would go further than Frame does there, and say the same applies to the laws that make sense of the facts. Laws and other abstractions are impossible without presupposing the Trinity.<sup>92</sup> This is because, like the oneness and threeness of God, laws and facts are equally ultimate. No facts can be understood without laws, and vice versa.

The Trinity is therefore the ground and pattern for all reality.<sup>93</sup> All creation is perspectival, and Christian epistemology is triperspectival. As Trinity, God is self-sufficient (*ase*), and therefore he is free to exercise transcendent Lordship without being *wholly other* (and therefore irrelevant to creation) as well as being immanent without being relative to creation in any way. Frame writes much about how his triperspectival scheme avoids the rationalist/irrationalist dialectics of thinkers throughout history, including the ancient Greeks (Form/Matter), Thomas Aquinas (Nature/Grace) and modernity (Nature/Freedom). Understood triperspectivally (reflecting the Trinity), revelation is possible, the universe is intelligible, and knowledge is obtainable--under the lordship of Christ. Jesus reveals what God is like to God's world (Heb. 12:1-2). His three offices fulfilled as Messiah (prophet, king and priest) reflect Frame's lordship attributes (control, authority, and presence, respectively). For the Christian, Jesus is prophet, king and priest in every area of life. Christian epistemology ought therefore to understand reality as reflecting those three perspectives in light of God's lordship attributes manifested in Christ's roles.<sup>94</sup>

### *Triperspectivalism as a Pedagogical Tool*

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<sup>92</sup> During our discourse, Frame reminded me that God being Trinity means he is both three *and* one. His threeness (diversity) comes into play when dealing with the facts of reality, but his oneness comes into play when dealing with laws.

<sup>93</sup> DKG 334

<sup>94</sup> TTD, 33.

One of our initial points of inquiry was whether Triperspectivalism was merely a hermeneutic or pedagogical tool, or if there is something deeper there. We have seen that there *is* something deeper--that Triperspectivalism reflects God's nature in God's world. However, Frame also offers it as a, "pedagogical approach, a way of teaching the Bible, i.e. doing what theology is supposed to do."<sup>95</sup> This is significant, given that Frame subscribes to "something close to biblicism,"<sup>96</sup> and biblical pedagogy is going to have implications for how Christians think about all of life.<sup>97</sup> For instance, Frame points out that triperspectivalism can guide ethical preaching.<sup>98</sup> And there are many other examples:

Triperspectivalism helps to provide answers to metaphysical questions<sup>99</sup> such as: the problem of the one and many, the basic composition of the universe, the relationship between universals and particulars (debated by realists and nominalists), whether the world is teleological or meaningless, causality, souls, the relationship between intellect, will, and feeling, and the nature of God. It also solves the problem inevitably raised over and over by unbelieving philosophies that devolve into contradictory concepts of transcendence (rationalism) and immanence (irrationalism)<sup>100</sup> ( on HWPT, 311).

### *Obligations Revealed by Triperspectivalism*

Because creation is triperspectival, and triperspectivalism is grounded in the Trinity,

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<sup>95</sup> John M. Frame, in an e-mail message to the author, December 3, 2016..

<sup>96</sup> SCB.

<sup>97</sup> To my knowledge, Frame never comes right out and calls himself a biblicist, most likely because of the misunderstandings and attacks that such a self-description would have open him up to from both sides. However, in discussion with Kevin Vanhoozer on November 30, 2016, Dr. Vanhoozer described Frame as a biblicist. Given Vanhoozer's knowledge of Frame's work, and the two theologians' friendship, I feel justified in using the term to describe Frame myself.

<sup>98</sup> STL, 346.

<sup>99</sup> HWPT, 9-11.

<sup>100</sup> HWPT, 311, cf. Schweitzer's Christ completely unknown and known in our experience.

therefore we ought to think more Trinitarianly--in a more triune way, referring, "BOTH to Threeness AND to oneness."<sup>101</sup> Echoing Van Til, Frame says that, "the balance between oneness and manyness is arguably the most important philosophical/theological issue."<sup>102</sup>

Frame is pleased that the church's interest in the Trinity "has greatly developed in the last fifty years or so,"<sup>103</sup> which signifies a turn away from Barthianism and Barth's attempt to derive the Trinity from the divine act of revelation (that is Sabellian at best).<sup>104</sup>

Yet he has concerns about recent developments: "Recent theology has gone somewhat overboard in the way they bring the Trinity into everything." As an example, he cites the, "feminist attempt to model marriage after the 'divine society.'" This is problematic, because "Scripture gives us a 'glimpse' of God's inner Trinitarian life, not a 'treatise.'"<sup>105</sup> (In his Trinitarian conceptualization, Frame favors a model more closely related to the psychological model than the social model, and that shows in his critique here.)

Frame worries that, "that a lot of young theologians have written dissertations on the Trinity because it is a chic thing to do, without really offering the church any useful biblical insight."<sup>106</sup> We must not, for the sake of emphasizing God's threeness, neglect his oneness. There is a mystery to the doctrine of the Trinity, and the follower of the Incarnate word should not speculate beyond what the written word reveals. Van Til would certainly have agreed with that sentiment.

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<sup>101</sup> John M. Frame, in an e-mail message to the author, December 3, 2016.. Emphasis his.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

*Interactions with Other Theologians on Triperspectivalism*

And what about other theologians and philosophers? Do they agree with Frame and his triperspectival scheme? I will review three briefly, before I spend significant time discussing Frame's teacher, Van Til.

For John Calvin's part, it seems he could have easily agreed with Frame. Calvin's work, consolidating the Reformation, opened up a new opportunity for Christian philosophy. Because God establishes the norms (*Sola Scriptura*), we must presuppose them. Because God has foreordained all facts (*Predestination*), all acts presuppose God's interpretation of them. Because God made humans in His image, we must understand ourselves in relation to him--and to the extent that we fail to do so (*Total Depravity*), we fail to understand ourselves properly.<sup>107</sup>

Derek Thomas, writing in Frame's *festschrift*, points out that Frame's categorizations seem arbitrary at times.<sup>108</sup> I can agree with Thomas' point to a certain extent. However, if triperspectivalism really is ingrained into creation, then identifying the three perspectives is about naming the right ones--not determining whether there *are* three perspectives.

Paul Helm gets more specific in his criticism, addressing the Frame's connection between God's omniscience and the multiperspectival nature of reality. Helm takes issue with Frame's idea that God understands every possible perspective; He sees from them all. God is not only omniscient, but omniperspectival.<sup>109</sup>

Helm: "Frame does not say whether such perspectives include those of all sensate creatures, lobsters and lions as well as men and women. Perhaps there are sets of sets of such

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<sup>107</sup> I was unable to find a citation for this idea (not a direct quote); it may be Frame, or it might be Settecase.

<sup>108</sup> STL, 356.

<sup>109</sup> Helm, Paul, "John Frame - God, time and space," Paul Helm's Deep: Philosophical Theology blog, April 1, 2014, [www.paulhelmsdeep.blogspot.com](http://www.paulhelmsdeep.blogspot.com).

perspectives. But it's a funny way of affirming divine omnipresence or ubiquity."<sup>110</sup> So Helm finds it odd that Frame should see God as knowing what his creation looks like from every perspective; I do not see why that should be a problem. I would go further and say that, not only does God see what lobsters and lions see, but also what rocks, molecules and photons do too (if such things can be said to possess a perspective, and I not see why they cannot--given that God created them and knows them, fully, as Creator).

### *What about Van Til?*

As part of my research, I set out to investigate what evidence there may be that Van Til approved of his pupil-turned-colleague Frame's Triperspectivalism. Is there any evidence that Van Til approved of Frame's triperspectivalism? Should he have?

This is relevant to the question of the role of Trinitarian theology in Frame's apologetics, because of (a) the crucial nature of Trinitarian theology to Van Til's own work in ethics (Van Til's goal, standard and motive triad) and metaphysics (explaining the one-and-many problem), and (b) the monumental importance of Van Til's work to the development of presuppositional apologetics, especially TAG. If it could be shown that Van Til either *did* approve, or that he *ought to have* approved of triperspectivalism, it would go a long way toward (a) establishing the internal consistency of contemporary presuppositional apologetics in the Framean stream, (b) potentially moving various presuppositional-apologetical schools closer together toward unity<sup>111</sup> and (c) satisfy curiosity for those who wonder just what Van Til *did* think of Frame's work.

Certainly Frame and Van Til did not see eye to eye on every issue, but how much

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Schools of thought who would agree with Van Til, but who would variously agree or disagree with Frame, citing perceived inconsistencies between Van Til and Frame.

evidence is there that Van Til would have viewed Frame's triperspectivalism as, perhaps, a next step in his own apologetic theology? Did Van Til recognize Frame's triperspectivalism as being in accordance with his own ideas?

Van Til saw the Trinity as the necessary presupposition for all knowledge. To what extent is Frame's triperspectivalism Van Tillian?

Why did Van Til insist that the Trinity was a necessary presupposition for making sense of the equal ultimacy of unity and diversity, of facts and laws? That is, if all that is necessary is to establish that God is both *plurality* and *unity*, then why say God is *three* rather than *two* (bare plurality)? Simply put, because that is not what Scripture says. Scripture says God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and Van Til is a biblicist like Frame. Therefore, the Doctrine of the Trinity is a second-tier doctrine, after the authority of Scripture, which is presupposed. And yet, Van Til was most definitely not a Barthian, so he did believe that God's **nature** is prior to God's interaction with humanity in Christ. In other words, the *doctrine* of the Trinity rests upon God's revelation, but the *Triune* nature of God precedes God's revelation. Something like Frame's perspectivalism could have helped to communicate this more clearly. What the Bible says is certainly true. (Because of Scripture's certainty, Van Til viewed apologetic arguments aimed at proving the probability of God as sub-Christian.)

Frame recalls that, when Van Til and he worked together at Westminster, "He was very old, and he continually reverted to slogans that he had developed many years before. He didn't seem to me to have the ability to give fair consideration to ideas that were new to him. He measured them by his old formulations, leading him prematurely to embrace or condemn."<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> John M. Frame, in an e-mail message to the author, December 3, 2016..

Van Til, “never criticized my use of perspectivalism to interpret his concept of an ‘analogical’ system.”<sup>113</sup> Humorously, William White, James Halsey, and others “tried to convince [Van Til] that Frame had undermined VT’s authentic presuppositionalism.” By Frame’s telling of it, Van Til tried to bring it up, but Frame changed the subject, and Van Til never pursued it further.<sup>114</sup>

It may be that Van Til never gave a hearty endorsement for Frame’s triperspectivalism because of the timing of it, and Van Til’s stage of life, rather than actual disagreement.<sup>115</sup> It seems that Van Til never really had the opportunity to give triperspectivalism a fair shake. It is fascinating to imagine how things might have been different, if he had been a younger man when the two of them were colleagues. Nevertheless, we will have to search for evidence of compatibility between Van Til’s work and Frame’s triperspectivalism outside of their personal interactions (you could say we need to move from the situational perspective to the normative--Van Til’s body of work--and the existential perspectives--his personal convictions).

Van Til averred that Presuppositional apologetics begins more explicitly with the Scriptures than classical apologetics, stresses the objective clarity of “God’s revelation wherever it appears,” and deals with no probability but only certainty.<sup>116</sup> To the extent that Frame deals believes in the importance of certainty, Van Til would approve!<sup>117</sup> For Frame the biblicist, “The most fundamental point of presuppositionalism is the application of Sola Scriptura to apologetics.”<sup>118</sup>

Sola Scriptura leads to robust trinitarianism, for both Frame and Van Til. Van Til’s

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> DCF, 254-255.

<sup>117</sup> Though Frame shows more softness toward probability-based arguments than many (most?) presuppositionalists, as a biblicist Frame presupposes biblical doctrine to be absolutely certain.

<sup>118</sup> STL, 528.

starting point is, “what the Bible says about God and his relation to the universe as unquestionably true on its own authority.”<sup>119</sup> “Take what the Bible says”--Van Til begins with God, but it is expressly what the Bible says about God. The Bible is the final standard of truth for Van Til.<sup>120</sup> Compare this with Frame: “Presuppositional apologetics tries to supply these reasons in a way that does not compromise the honor of our Lord Christ--there is no authority higher than Scriptures<sup>121</sup> (SSW Vol. 3 p. 209)

Van Til described presuppositions as like beams under the floor. You cannot see them, but you can't properly imagine the floor without them.<sup>122</sup> The first tenet of Christian metaphysics (the first “beam”) is, “the doctrine of the self-contained God or ontological Trinity.”<sup>123</sup> Van Til emphasized the two levels of reality (God and creation), whereas non-Christian philosophy is built upon the assumption of monism. Van Til presupposed the Trinity, which has implications for all of life--in mathematics, for example. Van Til fascinatingly explained the impossibility of something as simple as counting without first presupposing the triune God. .<sup>124</sup>

Diversity (facts) and unity (laws) require Trinitarian God back of reality. To the extent that Frame presupposes the Trinity; Van Til would heartily agree. However, Van Til emphasized the Trinity to support diversity and unity, rather than the explicitly threefold nature of reality as Frame does.

Frame agrees with Van Til, that the Trinity is necessary to make sense of the world at all.

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<sup>119</sup> DCF, 253.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>121</sup> John M. Frame, *John M. Frame's Selected Shorter Writings*, Vol. 3 (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2016), 209.

<sup>122</sup> DCF, 126.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 236.

<sup>124</sup> DCF, 273.

<sup>125</sup> So there is agreement, but there are different emphases. And because Van Til doesn't go there, while he might have agreed in principle, he may not have agreed--simply because it was outside the scope of his theologizing.

Since Van Til presupposed the Trinity, it makes sense that he should approve of Frame's triperspectivalism, insofar as it is established upon the Trinity. Van Til's two basic categories of thought are (1) "The Scripture as the direct, infallible Word of God." and (2) "The doctrine of God, in three persons, existing eternally in internal self-consciousness prior to his relationship to the world." "Greek theism," with its unbiblical view of God, cannot serve as a foundation for Christianity.<sup>126</sup> Rather, Greeks are following *their* federal head, Adam, in his original attempt to suppress the truth about what can be known about God (Van Til discusses Calvin's "sense of deity"). Rejecting the true and triune God, Greeks failed to recognize the equal ultimacy of the one and the many, and their philosophy and theology both reflect that.<sup>127</sup>

What Van Til has to say about the equal ultimacy of one and many smacks of Frame saying the three perspectives are equally ultimate. They are such because the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are equally ultimate; both men root their "equal ultimacy" doctrines in Trinitarian doctrine. Van Til is adamant that the Trinity alone explains the unity and diversity of the universe, and this is very important to him.<sup>128</sup> He should appreciate Frame's perspective on equal ultimacy. Again, Frame takes Van Til's idea a step further: not only are *unity* and *diversity* equally ultimate, but each of the Persons making up the diversity are *equally ultimate* with one another.

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<sup>125</sup> CVT, 77-78.

<sup>126</sup> The apologist may not begin by proving "bare theism" and then work forward to full-fledged Christian theism.

<sup>127</sup> DCF, 239.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 134.

God's oneness, says Frame, is relative to His threeness. And His threeness is relative to His oneness. God is therefore self-contained and requires nothing from creation. (recall Van Til's first tenet of Christian metaphysics above).

All this is fairly convincing evidence that Van Til should have heartily endorsed Frame's Triperspectivalism. Van Til focused on God, as ultimate personality, being the necessary precondition of intelligibility. He also wrote at length about the necessity of God being Triune, in order to make sense of the equally-ultimate unity and diversity of creation (see his many parables about the impossible relationship between facts and laws in a hypothetically God-less universe). Frame's triperspectivalism brings these two together and goes one (necessary) step further. The Trinity is not only necessary because God is many, but because God is specifically *three*. And his three-ness is reflected in reality (as I discussed above) in such a way that no fact makes sense without presupposing his three-ness.<sup>129</sup>

Frame discovered that the "three-ness" of creation, being understood as being rooted in God's nature, unlocks the whole of creation to a robust and intellectually satisfying level of inquiry. And Triperspectivalism provides a handy tool for summarizing Van Til's TAG: the Lord is the necessary precondition for the existence of laws and norms (normative), the intelligibility of the created universe (situational), and the meaningfulness of personal experience (existential).

Therefore, Van Til's TAG *is* triperspectival, though he lacked the proper "framework" to express it as such. Triperspectivalism is rooted in the Trinity. With that in mind, the role of Trinitarian theology in presuppositional apologetics begins to become clear.

Now how does all this relate to apologetics? How "Van Tillian" is Frame there? CVT

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<sup>129</sup> John M. Frame, in an e-mail message to the author, December 3, 2016.

says that we must presuppose the ontological Trinity or else we make God dependant upon the world (Defense, 398). God must be self-sufficient in all His attributes. For CVT, the Trinity is an ontological presupposition about reality. And this must be so, for the Christian idea of fact and logic to make sense. Van Til actually criticized Kuyper and Bavinck for ignoring the difference between the two (very different) conceptions of fact and logic held by the Christian and the unbeliever. He said they failed to recognize the divergence between, “the idea of fact and logic as it springs from the notion of the autonomous man, and the idea of fact and logic which springs from the position that is based upon the notion of the ontological Trinity.”<sup>130</sup> Van Til therefore claims that Kuyper and Bavinck have failed to establish a “fully Christian epistemology”<sup>131</sup> Van Til says that all, “interpretive efforts of man” must be based upon the presupposition of “this God and of the universe in all its aspects as the revelation of this God.” Frame’s recently published, *History of Western Philosophy and Theology* is filled with evidence that he agrees with Van Til.

We move forward now from epistemological concerns to Frame and Van Til’s apologetics. Van Til’s apologetics presupposed the Trinity, and this came out in his writing on apologetics. In this way he seems to foreshadow Frame’s triperspectivalism. For instance, his beliefs that one’s starting point, method and conclusion are always co-involved,<sup>132</sup> and that self-knowledge and world knowledge are bound up together with one another, both smack of perspectivalism.<sup>133</sup> And we have already seen how Van Til’s three sources of revelation

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<sup>130</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 182-186.

<sup>131</sup> Lawrence, O’Donnell, *An Analysis of Cornelius Van Til’s Presupposition of Reformed Dogmatics with special reference to Herman Bavinck’s Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* (2011), [www.Books.Google.com](http://www.Books.Google.com). O’Donnell specifically mentions the point that Van Til judged their epistemology as sub-Christian.

<sup>132</sup> John M. Frame, “Presuppositional Apologetics,” May 23, 2012, [www.Frame-Poythress.org](http://www.Frame-Poythress.org).

<sup>133</sup> DCF, 65.

(scripture, nature, and human personhood<sup>134</sup> and ethical triad (goal, standard and motive) gave rise to Frame's triperspectivalism.<sup>135</sup> There is much agreement between the two. And yet there is not *total* agreement.

Contra Van Til, Frame believes it is possible to argue directly rather than just indirectly (though the argument may still be complex).<sup>136</sup> And whereas Van Til believed it was possible to refute all alternatives to Christian theism, Frame is not convinced.

However, both Frame and Van Til presuppose the truth, authority and perspicuity of Scripture, and there is little doubt that Frame would agree with Van Til's assessment of "Romanist" and Arminian apologetics, that they lead to downgraded views of Scripture.<sup>137</sup> Further, Frame and Van Til both agree on the relationships between laws and facts, abstractions and incidentals. In his analysis of Van Til's thought, Frame describes Van Til's view that the only alternative to Christian theism is "laws" resting in a void.<sup>138</sup> Frame's work is notable for demonstrating how Rationalism (focusing on laws) and irrationalism (focusing on subjectivism) are both impossible.<sup>139</sup>

As a "movement leader," Van Til may not have wanted to fully endorse Frame's triperspectival approach. But Van Til the thinker would have found much to agree on, and no major discrepancies, between their two bodies of work.<sup>140</sup> To answer the question, yes, Van Til should have endorsed Frame's triperspectivalism--because it is, we might say, "Van Tillian" and

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<sup>134</sup> AJCB, 282.

<sup>135</sup> John M. Frame, in an e-mail message to the author, November 19, 2016..

<sup>136</sup> John M. Frame, "Presuppositional Apologetics," May 23, 2012, [www.Frame-Poythress.org](http://www.Frame-Poythress.org).

<sup>137</sup> DCF, 132.

<sup>138</sup> CVT, 328.

<sup>139</sup> Empiricism is impossible, because any perceived order may just be apparent or temporary.

<sup>140</sup> I am indebted to my brother, Parker Settecase, for this insight, in personal discussion, December 18, 2016.

then some.

### *Apologetics*

I have been defining key terms relevant to Frame's work, in order to provide a background for understanding his approach to theology, epistemology, metaphysics and ontology, because these are all relevant to answering the question at hand: "What is the role of Trinitarian theology in John Frame's apologetics? I shall answer the question in two steps: first, I will define apologetics in a stipulative way, in order to summarize what Frame says about apologetics. Then, I will connect the dots between Trinitarian theology and Frame's apologetics and directly answer the question. As it turns out, unsurprisingly, the answer is in the form of a triad (as I mentioned in my Introductory Considerations above).

#### Frame's Definition of Apologetics

Frame has variously defined it as, "the theological discipline that defends the truth of the Christian message"<sup>141</sup> and as "the application of Scripture to unbelief."<sup>142</sup> For Frame, apologetics, like other disciplines, is triperspectival.<sup>143</sup>

What is *not* the purpose of apologetics? It is not for in-house "movement battles."<sup>144</sup> It is rather a battle for soul control.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Frame, John M, "Presuppositional Apologetics," May 23, 2012, [www.Frame-Poythress.org](http://www.Frame-Poythress.org).

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, cf. *DKG*, 81, 87.

<sup>143</sup> *SSW2*, 185.

<sup>144</sup> *SSW1*, 184.

<sup>145</sup> See Frame's discussion concerning this in *STL*, 248-251.

### *A Stipulative Definition of Apologetics*

Rather than use one of Frame's own definitions, I will give and describe a stipulative definition, based on my studies of Frame. I believe we may describe Framean apologetics as, the joyful, spiritual discipline in which a Christian uncompromisingly applies the biblical Gospel to unbelieving thought in a compelling way. Apologetics is spiritual. Insofar as it involves a Christian, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, participating with the Holy Spirit in the furthering of Christ's kingdom according to the plan of God, it is a spiritual activity, and it is a joyful one!

### The Role of Trinitarian Theology

#### *The Criterion of Apologetics*

Trinitarian theology provides the criterion of Christian apologetics. Apologetics has a God-given standard, a criterion by which it may (must!) be evaluated. It has a God-given purpose, namely, evangelism.<sup>146</sup> Frame says, the Gospel must never be far off when doing apologetics:<sup>147</sup> "Let us remember, too, that apologetics is evangelistic, a communication of the Gospel of Jesus Christ" (Frame, *Apologetics*, 277).<sup>148</sup> It must involve delivering the biblical Gospel in an uncompromising way. Frame maintains, along with Van Til, that neutrality is impossible, and therefore the apologete should not pretend to be neutral or obfuscate the Gospel in any way. In short, the apologete must be an unapologetic evangelist.

There are three goals to Framean apologetics: (1) prove Christianity is true (vs. doubt),

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<sup>146</sup> Insofar as the apologete is dealing with non-Christians. When a Christian uses apologetics to strengthen his own faith, that would not be called evangelism *per se*, but it is nevertheless applying the Biblical Gospel to unbelieving thought, etc. I believe the definition stands.

<sup>147</sup> STL 413

<sup>148</sup> AJCB, 277.

(2) defend against objections, and (3) go on the offense--attack against falsehood (offensive arguments must derive from revelational norms).<sup>149</sup> I will discuss the presuppositional two-step method more in depth below.

While arguing for the truth of Christianity, the apologete never abandons his presupposition of the Biblical God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit). Christian apologetics must be biblical. Here is one aspect of the importance of Trinitarian theology to Frame's apologetics: the triune God is the only God that Christian apologists are interested in proving.<sup>150</sup> Further, and specifically relevant to Frame's triperspectivalism, the triune God is the ground of the threefold nature of knowledge being appealed to (biblical truth about the Creator and creation that is rational, true and satisfying) and to the triadic nature of reality itself.

Christian apologetics must be evangelistic,<sup>151</sup> which means it must adhere to the Gospel. The Gospel is very Trinitarian (as I discussed above), so there is another aspect of the importance of Trinitarian theology as the criterion of apologetics.

Moreover, the triune God has revealed himself in his word, his world and within the human self. These three sources of revelation correspond to the lordship attributes and the three divine Persons. Insofar as the apologete appeals to revelation from these sources in a thoroughly Christian way, he is acknowledging the role of Trinitarian theology as criterion.

### *The Methodology of Apologetics*

Trinitarian theology shapes the methodology of Frame's apologetics, which involves Transcendental argumentation for God (TAG), evidences and psychological appeals.

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<sup>149</sup> STL, 406.

<sup>150</sup> CVT, 127-128

<sup>151</sup> See my above comment about dealing with the believer's own doubt and unbelief.

TAG proves God's truth by marshalling Biblical presuppositions and reasoning to demonstrate the impossibility of the contrary. Such argumentation is triperspectival. Appeal to law and scripture (normative; cf. Jesus' own apologetic reasoning with the Scribes and Pharisees and the Apostle Paul in Acts 17). Argue from the facts about the world (situational). And appeal to the whole person (existential). Just as it is impossible for anything to make sense without God (theism), it is likewise impossible to make sense of the world without the *biblical* God (Trinity).

TAG involves two steps, followed by a third step.

(1) Both parties assume the unbeliever's point of view for the sake of argument. Do a *reductio* to demonstrate the absurdity of the unbelief. Really you're just telling the unbeliever how his views look to you as a Christian.<sup>152</sup>

(2) Ask the unbeliever to assume your position for the sake of argument. Attempt a *reductio*, which is impossible. Demonstrate that the Christian worldview is the only one that makes sense. In this process, do not pretend that there is any "neutral ground" between the Christian and non-Christian positions. The unbelieving position is absurd, so trying to bring Christianity over to the unbelieving side in any way--perhaps in an appeal to "bare facts"--would make Christianity similarly absurd.

The desire for being accepted can sway the apologist to desire to give up too much. Apologists have historically gone too far went too far. Frame cites Justin Martyr as an example, but we need not look outside of our current time for more contemporary examples.<sup>153</sup>

It is important for the apologete to present the truth uncompromisingly, in order that the non-Christian may, by God's grace, realize it and repent. Thus the apologete moves to the third

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<sup>152</sup> DKG, 359.

<sup>153</sup> HWPT, 90-91.

step: (3) plead with the unbeliever to accept Christ as Savior from the sin of autonomy.

TAG takes seriously the biblical obligation to presuppose revelation and address unbelieving suppression of the truth. The apologete uses indirect (or direct, says Frame) argumentation to show that the non-Christian alternative is impossible.<sup>154</sup> The apologete, arguing transcendently, understands that the goal of apologetics is to convince people that the triune God's revelation is true, and the criterion for truth.<sup>155</sup> God is not just the conclusion of the argument but the one who makes the argument possible.

The case could be made, therefore, that Frame's TAG is influenced by Trinitarian theology (via triperspectivalism) in that it offers and defends the truth of the triune God (normative), undercuts and disproves all unbelieving worldviews (situational) and invites the unbeliever to repent and trust in Jesus, appealing in a compelling way to the unbeliever's reason, experience and emotions. The apologete is to build on the strengths of his opponent's views and show how only the correct view will satisfy the unbeliever's desire.<sup>156</sup>

According to the Bible the unbeliever, after all, is suppressing the truth. He is presupposing both God and not-God. They know God, and they do not know God.<sup>157</sup> Unbelievers make a religious choice to deny God. For instance, presupposing naturalistic evolution, because the only alternative is Biblical creationism, is a religious choice<sup>158</sup>

So how does the unbeliever both know and not know God? Everyone knows God in one

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<sup>154</sup> Frame does not agree with Van Til and others who say that transcendental argumentation must be indirect. However a comprehensive discussion of that matter is outside the boundaries of this paper.

<sup>155</sup> Frame, John M, "Presuppositional Apologetics," May 23, 2012, [www.Frame-Poythress.org](http://www.Frame-Poythress.org).

<sup>156</sup> DKG, 328, where Frame gives the example that only Calvinism will satisfy the desire to make human decision-making significant.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 186.

of two ways.<sup>159</sup> For the unbeliever, there are certain truths about God that are self-evident from God's revelation. For the Christian, however, knowledge of God is "servant-knowledge," that is, knowledge about God as Lord and a knowledge that is subject to God as Lord.<sup>160</sup>

The unbeliever has enough God-knowledge to be without excuse. They lack love for God, and are involved with Him as an enemy. Their response is irrational. Their disobedience is tantamount to lying. They fight against the truth. They affirm falsehoods, living as practical atheists. Their unbelief leads to holding conflicting beliefs. Their epistemology is affected--they cannot reason correctly. Therefore lies often dominate over truth (which must be the opposite of the case for the Christian). Their efforts are self-frustrating, because it's impossible to destroy truth and establish a false god.<sup>161</sup>

Attempting to avoid a crazy state of affairs--a nonsensical world of facts<sup>162</sup>--the unbeliever borrows on the Christian worldview. Without acknowledging the triune God, they trust that unity and diversity, laws and facts, etc., obtain and are intelligible. Yet while borrowing on Christianity, they reject the true God and pursue impossible autonomy.

The Christian is in a unique position to help the unbeliever, because unbelieving thought systems always, necessarily point away from the biblical truth of God, back of all reality, being ultimate tri-personality. Something vital is always left out in the unbeliever's concept of God, making his concept of God an idol. Idols cannot satisfy or give eternal life; only God can. Frame's triperspectival approach to apologetics allows one to see what is missing from other worldviews.<sup>163</sup> The Christian apologete conveys nothing less than God himself to the unbeliever

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 39-40.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>162</sup> Frame defines facts as states of affairs, in DKG, 100.

<sup>163</sup> Cf. STL 456-469.

and offers God's own wholeness and new life.

### *Methodology in Practice*

Keeping our attention on methodology, we will now take a look at several competing worldviews and see how Frame's apologetics addresses them.

### Epistemological Frameworks

Empiricism: to begin with, the fact that belief in Empiricism is itself a non-empirical (and therefore self-refuting) tenet of faith. Frame also says about Empiricists that, "[They] have to admit that sense-experience does not reveal ultimates, that it does not warrant certainty. So how can it be an 'ultimate' standard of anything?"<sup>164</sup> Empiricism cannot account for reality the way Christian theism can.

Rationalism: "...what ground is there for thinking that human reason is reliable enough to serve as the final criterion of truth and knowledge?"<sup>165</sup>

Rationalism, Empiricism, Existentialism all center on one of the perspectives of knowledge (reason, the external world and the human self). The Christian worldview, insofar as it is triperspectival, brings the three together.<sup>166</sup>

Unbelieving epistemological movements fail to make progress. Locke's skepticism and Berkeley's nominalism both demonstrate this. The Enlightenment made no actual progress in philosophy. Frame says, "A biblical epistemology might have opened these philosophers to other

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<sup>164</sup> TTD, 38

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 38

<sup>166</sup> Frame discusses this at length in HWPT.

ways of understanding such concepts,” as man, God, soul, matter and substance.<sup>167</sup>

### Philosophical Worldview Schemes

Platonic Idealism: Frame writes about Plato that, “[for] him, the forms, sense objects, and human minds are ‘just there,’ autonomous and independent. God plays no role in creating, redeeming, or coordinating these; so there is no reason for us to expect them to be coordinated.<sup>168</sup> So Platonic Idealism cannot account for any relationship between concretion and abstraction, laws and facts.

Atheistic naturalism falls on the same sword.

### Ethical Theories

Major ethical theories focus exclusively on one perspective and leave out two of the three perspectives. Deontology (command, normative), Teleology (narrative, situational), and Existentialism (virtue, existential)<sup>169</sup> are blatant examples. Triperspectivalism shows that there is no need to make one perspective prior to the others. Further, only in the triune God is there a basis for loving right and hating wrong.<sup>170</sup>

### Worldview Movements

Modernism denies the situational perspective. Postmodernity over-emphasizes the situational perspective, focusing on “locatedness.”<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> HWPT, 195-196.

<sup>168</sup> TTD, 38

<sup>169</sup> STL, 4-5.

<sup>170</sup> SSW2, 197.

<sup>171</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer, in discussion with the author, November 30, 2016.

## Other Theistic Religions

What about non-Trinitarian, theistic religions such as Islam and Judaism? Perhaps they seem better than polytheistic or atheistic alternatives at first blush. However, when applied consistently they likewise make knowledge impossible. In both religions, God is a monad, a bare unity. Knowledge is not possible on a monist view. An absolute oneness could not share any attribute with creation or relate to it in any way, or it would no longer be unique but relative to creation. Islam's god could never communicate with us. Islam and Judaism's concepts of God are both ultimately unknowable.

And they are either unloving or "wholly other," but they cannot be both. An absolute oneness, if it were to love, would become relative to creation. In Christianity, however, God's oneness is relative to His threeness. And His threeness is relative to His oneness. God is therefore self-contained and requires nothing from creation.<sup>172</sup>

## Apologetic Methodology for Answering Competing Worldviews

Trinitarian theology plays a vital role in providing an answer to worldviews based in human autonomy as ultimate authority (as they all are, apart from Christianity).

The apologete appeals to the whole person, the unbeliever's intellect, will and emotions.

<sup>173</sup> These three truth-seeking faculties are triperspectivally related and reflect the triune nature of God.<sup>174</sup>

Frame says that the Christian is free to provide evidences for Christian faith (a more

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<sup>172</sup> CVT, 82

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 145

<sup>174</sup> DKG 329

charitable approach than that of some presuppositionalists). Frame agrees with Calvin's sources of revelation, and recognizes them forming a nonad--a nine-fold source of revelation from God--of sources for evidences. Revelation is: (1) from God about the God, about the world, and about self, (2) from the world about God, about the world, and about self, and (3) from the self about God, about the world, and about the self. The apologete may draw from any of these nine wells for apologetical arguments--all in support of the ultimate goal of conveying the biblical gospel.

The apologete must always provide evidences within the biblical framework, rooted in biblical, Trinitarian theology. To the extent that Classical and Evidentialist apologists have failed to do this, they have created problems. Let us take a look at what is perhaps the most important objection to Christianity today show how triperspectivalism, rooted in Trinitarian theology, answers it better than the Classical approach.

### The Problem of Evil<sup>175</sup>

The Free Will Defense, developed by Classicalists, relies on the presupposition that moral agents (such as humans and angels) have libertarian free will. In light of this, Frame calls the Free Will Defense, Pelagian.<sup>176</sup>

However, there have been three other answers to the Problem of Evil that, when viewed triperspectively, solve the issue.

First, the normative answer. What right does the creature have to question the authority of

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<sup>175</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I am going to talk jointly about both the existential problem of evil and the logical problem of evil. I know they are different (though maybe not *that* different) but I am approaching them perspectively, so I do not distinguish between them here.

<sup>176</sup> STL 513

the Creator? Further, on what grounds does the unbeliever accuse God of wrongdoing (by allowing evil)--seeing as the unbeliever has no objective standard for right or wrong, that extends beyond his own mind. Operating from biblical presuppositions, suffering and death are bound up with the “wages of sin.” Therefore suffering of sinners is deserved. Frame calls this the “shut-up defense.”<sup>177</sup>

Next, the situational answer. God is exercising his rightful control over his creation, ultimately bringing *goodness* out of the evil that he permits (Romans 8:28; cf. Acts 2:23 and Genesis 50:20). The burden of proof falls on God’s accuser, who would need to be able to see reality from every possible perspective (an ability only God--and certainly no human--has!) in order to be certain that God is not bringing about a greater good from evil. Historically, this has been known as the “greater good” defense.<sup>178</sup>

Finally, the existential answer. The Holy Spirit gives the believer a new heart (Ezekiel 11:19, 36:26) and indwells him. The “Comforter” enables him to persevere, even joyfully, through trials and tribulations (John 14:17; 16:7, 33), and fixes his eyes on his victory in Jesus (Rev. 12:11). Through this process, God builds the Christian and conforms him into the image of Jesus (Rom. 8:29). The suffering of saints is redemptive. Historically, this is known as the “soul-building defense.”

### *The Motivation of Apologetics*

Trinitarian theology defines the motivation for doing apologetics. The Christian is motivated to obey God, to glorify Christ in the world, and to experience participating with the

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<sup>177</sup> AJCB, 293.

<sup>178</sup> AJCB, 221.

Holy Spirit in applying God's work to persons and in growing Christ's kingdom to the glory of God.

### *Implications and Next Steps*

Framean apologetics are presuppositional, triperspectival and thoroughly biblical. These three attributes are bound up with the Triune nature of God. Trinitarian theology provides the criterion by which biblical apologetics is judged. It shapes the apologete's method and defines the motivation of every Christian for engaging in apologetics.

Trinitarian theology, applied through triperspectivalism, opens up all of creation to the apologete, who is free to use anything and everything as "evidence" for the truth of the Triune God revealed in Scripture.

Further, Trinitarian theology, consciously connected to our apologetics, serves as a reminder not to leave out anything (any of the perspectives). Practically speaking, says Frame, it is edifying, when we are doing theology, to go through the perspectives one by one to see if we are missing anything."<sup>179</sup> Theology and apologetics, of course, are closely related.

There is work yet to be done. Perhaps triperspectivalism will have implications in fields of study more typically associated with the "secular" world and with everyday life.<sup>180</sup>

A parting word of warning, however. Digging into triperspectivalism will open up the world to you in another way. As I studied, I began to "see triangles everywhere," as one friend put it. It really is amazing how God has signed his autograph on all his creation. The Scripture is certainly true when it says, "The heavens declare the glory of God" (Psalm 19:1). Yes, the heavens and everything in them declare the glory of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit!

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<sup>179</sup> TTD, 54.

<sup>180</sup> Perhaps we are beginning to see this, with the return to classical schools among some Christian communities. Classical education is based on the three-fold *trivium* of grammar, logic and rhetoric.

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