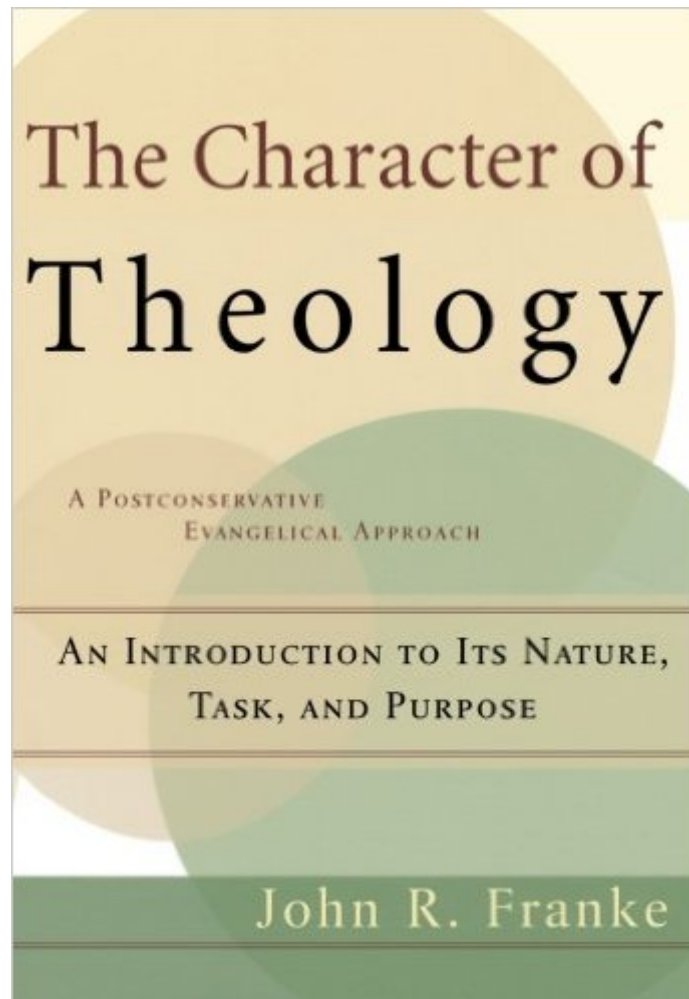


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The Character Of Theology: An Introduction To Its Nature, Task, And Purpose



Synopsis

Theology done in today's context is strikingly different from past evangelical approaches. In this new project John Franke, writing with our postmodern world in mind, reflects these directions. He offers an introduction to theology that covers the usual territory, but does so attuned to today's ecclesial and cultural context. In contradistinction to more traditional works, Franke: critiques traditional evangelical theological conceptions emphasizes the "local" nature of theology engages the postmodern context contrasts conservative and postconservative approaches interacts with the broader faith community Sure to provoke intense discussion, *The Character of Theology* will help Christians to be faithful in a world in which the spiritual and intellectual landscape is ever changing.

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Customer Reviews

I found Franke's book *The Character of Theology* to be a provocative but ultimately unsatisfying attempt to reconcile current linguistic and epistemological theory with evangelical Christian faith. Franke's approach throughout the book is to lay out the position of nonfoundationalist philosophy, pointing out where that conflicts with the crypto-modernist approach to dogmatic theology practiced by evangelicalism. Unfortunately, he fails to provide a workable path forward, as his approach to the constitutive nature of evangelical identity is conflicted. He seems to identify with Roger Olson's centered-set understanding (p. 36), but he then implies that even the center is not a fixed point, writing that "convictions and commitments, even the most long-standing, remain subject to ongoing scrutiny and the possibility of revision,

reconstruction, or even rejection (p. 78). Contradictorily, he backs off this view later, stating that a proper reforming theology is not a matter of "having everything open to revision all the time" (p. 111). If all Franke is saying is that theological creeds are fallible, he is saying nothing more than the long-standing and foundationalist-compatible principle of *semper reformanda*; however, if he is arguing that even the theological center is uncertain and up for revision and rejection, he is proposing a much more radical program than is recognizable as evangelical. The latter position seems to be the necessary conclusion of Franke's epistemological commitments; however, he seems conflicted over an evangelical identity he is unwilling to give up, forcing him to draw a forced and uneasy alliance between the two. It may in fact be possible to reconcile the linguistic turn with a historically consonant faith formulation, but Franke does not provide it.

I agree with most of the comments of one of the other reviewers, particularly the difficulties with the authority of scripture (if one context cannot speak into another, how does God communicate?) Franke's answer seems to be through the Spirit but this doesn't seem to solve the problem of why the Spirit needs the Scripture at all. There is a lot of overlap between this book and "Beyond Foundationalism" by Franke and the late Stanley Grenz, sometimes almost verbatim overlap. I also agree Franke's critique does not have the depth of Vanhoozer (my personal favorite), Jamie Smith or Wesphal (all great authors to check out, by the way, if this book whets your appetite). In spite of these weaknesses, the book is an excellent critique of modern foundationalism and its influence on the evangelical church. While it may be hard to find a "classic foundationalist" anywhere at all (and Franke's critique is of classical foundationalism and in that sense Franke is battling windmills instead of dragons, since most foundationalists are of the softer variety), he does make some strong points. Knowledge is transmitted from context to context, it seems to be impossible for it to be impartial. He also makes a strong point about evangelicals having a tendency to treat the Bible as "a collection of propositions" ready to be analyzed and from that analysis a collection of principles derived by which we live. It does seem as though there are other ways of communicating truth other than propositionally (for example narrative, poetry, metaphor) and that most communication of knowledge will somehow be tainted by the context from which it comes and the context to which it goes. While I find this critique compelling, as was mentioned by the other reviewer, Franke's solution does seem weak. Basically, the Bible becomes the "norming norm" by which we judge all of our actions and we decipher the meaning of the Bible (coming from one context to another) through the Holy Spirit. While claiming Reformation thought as the inspiration for this solution, it does seem

more like experientialism to me. First, why have the Bible at all, surely if the Holy Spirit is the only active element in knowing the truth of Scripture he could speak to us as easily through Zane Grey or Superman Action comic #1. Franke fails to develop a reason that scripture is necessary. Second, the history of Protestantism is fragmentation based on varying interpretations of scripture and this view of Scripture would seem to promote further disintegration of the church rather than unity. Third, while distinct communities are healthy, I don't know if he proves that distinctly Christian communities are necessary. His view of orthodoxy is very broad but I wonder how difficult it would be, using his logic, to accept a distinctly non-Orthodox community as one that embodies truth and defines it within its own community. So if each individual community defines its own truth within its own context, why is a Christian community necessarily right while a non-Christian one not? In spite of these caveats (and many more I haven't time to discuss), I still highly recommend this book. I think Franke raises issues that will be critical to the church in the coming decades and much of this thought mirrors that of the emerging church which is growing in influence. My advice is to read it critically and also, if your interest is piqued, take a look at some of the other authors mentioned earlier for a deeper look at these issues. You might also look at some of the works of Lindbeck (post-liberal) and Horton (reformed).

John's latest book, strikes out from where that text left off, although John suggests it is more of a prequel, and it is much easier to read. It's slim at 200 pages, and set to become another key text for people wanting to understand theology in a post-modern context. What I love about the book, is that John put's himself into it, theology is part of his journey and story, this is not esoteric academics, but someone who has been trying to make sense of his own questions and those of his students in the real world. So if like John you value your evangelical heritage, appreciate the process the reformers undertook, and want to engage meaningfully with our post-modern context, this is the book for that. I love John's sub title, for the book, 'A Post-conservative evangelical approach'.

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