Ongoing theological reflection on the message of the Gospel in the borderland existence of the church is the task to which every generation of Christian thinkers is called. This borderland existence is stretching theologians to consider anew the ways in which the church can speak meaningfully to an emerging world caught in the overlap of modernism and postmodernism. In his latest book, John Franke, professor of theology at Biblical Theological Seminary, produces an important conversation piece for those interested in the question of postmodernism and the church.

Franke grounds this conversation piece in the conviction that theology must embrace both an understanding of God and of ourselves. For Franke this conviction springs from his reading of John Calvin; he writes: “...the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves are inextricably bound together in such a way that we cannot properly claim to possess an appropriate and adequate grasp of either apart from knowledge of the other” (p.13).

Arising from this conviction, Franke sets out to trace the contours of theological reflection in an emerging postmodern world. Chapter one, Doing Theology Today, presents a lean, but insightful exploration of the contemporary situation in which the practice of theology is currently taking place. Here Franke acknowledges the muddy waters surrounding the term ‘postmodern’, writing, “...the term has come to signify widely divergent hopes and concerns among those who are attempting to address the emerging cultural and intellectual shifts it implies” (p. 16). By the end of the first chapter, having ably engaged such conversation partners as Kevin Vanhoozer, Merold Wesphal, Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, and Karl Barth, Franke offers the following working definition of theology: “Christian theology is an ongoing, second-order, contextual discipline that engages in the task of critical and constructive reflection on the beliefs and practices of the Christian church for the purpose of assisting the community of Christ’s followers in their missional vocation to live as the people of God in the particular social-historical context in which they are situated” (p. 44). The following four chapters, then, are essentially an exposition of this definition.
In chapters two, three, four and five Franke moves from articulating the philosophical and cultural milieu of the twenty-first century and a brief foray into the subject of theology (chapter two), to the main purpose of his book; namely, defining the nature, task and purpose of theology.

In chapter two, *The Subject of Theology*, Franke focuses his attention on the subject of theology and suggests, “For Christians, the subject of theology is the God revealed in Jesus Christ. Accordingly, the Christian answer to the question of God’s identity ultimately leads to the doctrine of the Trinity” (p. 45). Chapter two moves from identifying the importance, and therefore centrality, of the doctrine of the trinity, to tracing the development – the waxing and waning – of this doctrine in the history of the church.

At one point Franke asserts that “Christian theology must be trinitarian because the understanding of God as triune reflects the biblical narrative and ... has informed and shaped the theological conversation throughout the history of the church” (p. 60). But for all this, Franke only cites three passages in the New Testament – whose meanings are not uncontested – to support his assertion that trinitarian thinking is at the heart of the biblical narrative. This chapter leaves the reader wondering whether Franke has himself succumbed to a mere “‘concordance’ conception of theology,” (p. 88) – one that doesn’t take seriously the polyphony of voices in the biblical witness.

It is precisely to this issue that Franke applies himself in chapter three, *The Nature of Theology*. In this chapter Franke “examines the nature of theology as an ongoing, second-order, contextual disciple” (p. 84). Franke writes, “... theology has been shaped by the thought forms and conceptual tools of numerous cultural settings and has shown itself to be remarkably adaptable in its task of assisting the church in extending and establishing the message of the gospel in a variety of contexts” (pp. 84-5).

Unexpectedly, Franke employs a study of Origen as an example of engaging culture; providing the community of faith with both the type and antitype when it comes to engaging culture. On the one hand, as Franke points out, “Origen believed that Christian faith itself was a kind of divine philosophy that ... could make use of [the Hellenistic philosophies of his day] ...” (p. 94). On the other hand, Origen’s allegorical reading of Scripture, which Franke suggests is a “legacy of Greek thought” (p. 96) has become, in many circles, not least those who firmly adhere to biblical criticism, the antitype of engaging and borrowing from culture.