New Testament Theology

Many Witnesses, One Gospel

I. Howard Marshall
To Dai, Doug, Alan and Nathalie,

my sons- and daughter-in-law
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Preface

The aim of this book is to provide a guide to the theology of the New Testament that will be at a level and of a length suitable for use by students but will also be of use to all who are interested in the subject. In an era of increasingly lengthy books on every aspect of New Testament study, I have tried to be reasonably succinct and to produce a work of manageable scope.

Works on New Testament theology may be organized more in terms of theological themes as they are treated throughout the New Testament or more in terms of the theological teaching of the individual New Testament books. The approach taken here is to let each of the individual books of the New Testament speak for themselves and then to attempt some kind of synthesis of their teaching. Any approach has its drawbacks, and the weakness of this approach is that the reader will find discussion of, say, the church spread over various chapters and will need to make good use of the index. However, the great strength of this approach is that it lets the structure and the content of the discussion be shaped by what the individual writers were trying to say in the actual documents. In order to avoid repetition, some topics, which might be discussed equally well in other contexts, will generally be taken up in one place (e.g., the concept of the church as the body of Christ is discussed in the chapter on Ephesians, although it could also have been taken up in connection with Colossians).

In accordance with this aim of producing a book that will be helpful to students, the bibliographies have been deliberately confined to works in English that should for the most part be not too difficult to access. However, the two or three commentaries that I have listed for each book of the New Testament tend to be among the more solid ones available, and some of them may need at least a modest knowledge of Greek to get the most out of them. I see no point in providing exhaustive lists of literature (which I haven’t read in any case) and
offering no guidance as to which books should be priorities for the student. I have not listed books in other languages with one exception: I have given references to the main German theologies of the New Testament where appropriate (and very occasionally to other works that have influenced me).

Biblical citations are taken from the NIV (Inclusive Language Edition) for the Old Testament and from the TNIV for the New Testament unless otherwise indicated.

I am grateful to InterVarsity Press for their patience in waiting for the long-delayed completion of this book and for their efficient production.

_I. Howard Marshall_
GENERAL BIBLIOGRAPHY


General Bibliography

*Stauffer, Ethelbert. *New Testament Theology.* London: SCM Press, 1955. The original was published in Germany in 1941 but was not unsurprisingly unavailable to students elsewhere.

New Testament theologies asterisked above are referred to at the head of many chapter bibliographies by the name of the author.
## Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ANRW</td>
<td>Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBR</td>
<td>Bulletin for Biblical Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BJRL</td>
<td>Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBQ</td>
<td>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CTJ</td>
<td>Canadian Theological Journal</td>
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<tr>
<td>DJG</td>
<td>Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels</td>
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<td>DNTB</td>
<td>Dictionary of New Testament Background</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DPL</td>
<td>Dictionary of Paul and His Letters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDBT</td>
<td>Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology</td>
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<tr>
<td>EDNT</td>
<td>Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament</td>
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<tr>
<td>EQ</td>
<td>Evangelical Quarterly</td>
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<td>Int</td>
<td>Interpretation</td>
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<tr>
<td>JBL</td>
<td>Journal of Biblical Literature</td>
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<tr>
<td>JETS</td>
<td>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</td>
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<td>JSNT</td>
<td>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</td>
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<tr>
<td>NIV</td>
<td>New International Version</td>
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<td>NRSV</td>
<td>New Revised Standard Version</td>
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<tr>
<td>NTS</td>
<td>New Testament Studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>REB</td>
<td>Revised English Bible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SJT</td>
<td>Scottish Journal of Theology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNT (SU)</td>
<td>Studien zum Neuen Testament (und seiner Umwelt)</td>
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<tr>
<td>TNIV</td>
<td>Today's New International Version</td>
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<td>TynB</td>
<td>Tyndale Bulletin</td>
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PART 1

INTRODUCTION
Before we can discuss how to write the theology of the New Testament, we need to say something about the legitimacy and possibility of the enterprise.

The New Testament as an Object of Study
The most vocal contemporary critic of the enterprise is Heikki Räisänen, who makes four points to show why it must not and cannot be done.¹

First, Räisänen claims that the historical and the theological must be kept separate. He argues that it is not the job of New Testament scholars as New Testament scholars to deal with theology; rather their sphere is history. The New Testament scholar can write a purely descriptive account of the early church, but nothing more. To write theology is to be prescriptive, and the New Testament scholar as such has no authority to prescribe anything to anybody.

Second, Räisänen also argues that the nature of the material confines us to writing a history of the religion of the early Christians. Here he is going back to the limited agenda set up a century ago by William Wrede.

Third, a study confined to the New Testament documents is said to rest on an artificial limitation; it is determined by a canonization process that represents a later theological decision and has no basis in the early history of the church.

Fourth, there is so much contradiction between the documents that a theology of the New Testament in the sense of a unified theological outlook common to the documents cannot be extracted from them.

Räisänen’s arguments have been subjected to detailed and largely convincing criticism by Peter Balla. Balla responds to his first point by arguing that there is no good reason why the theology of the first Christians cannot be the object of historical study, and that such historical study can be pursued without starting from a churchly standpoint or concluding with a statement of what the church ought to believe. The first of these two rejoinders is sound, but more needs to be said about the second one later.

Perhaps the simplest and most convincing response to Räisänen’s second point is to note that no fewer than ten major presentations by highly competent New Testament scholars of widely differing theological persuasions have appeared in the last few years. It is hard to believe that they were all united in doing something that is fundamentally illegitimate, and the existence of their works demonstrates that the enterprise is possible!

The Problem of the Canon

More weight attaches to Räisänen’s third point. At the outset there is the question whether the set of twenty-seven documents that are grouped together as the New Testament form a unified collection, one that is capable of being meaningfully distinguished from other documents of the period and is an appropriate object of study. Is it proper to examine the New Testament documents in their own right? Is it right to exclude, say, the apostolic fathers or the Gospel of Thomas or the Gospel of Peter from consideration? We can assemble some five arguments in favor of doing so, the first four of which appear to me to be sound.

First, these documents were recognized by later Christians as forming a collection of Scriptures akin to the collection of writings accepted by the Jews as their Scriptures. The shape of the collection and the core of its con-


\[2\] See the works by Klaus Berger, G. B. Caird, J. Gnilka, Ferdinand Hahn, Hans Hubner, George Eldon Ladd, Walter Schmithals, Georg Strecker, Peter Stuhlmacher and Ulrich Wilckens listed in the general bibliography. More works are known to be in preparation.
tents were essentially determined by no later than the end of the second century, although it took until A.D. 367 before we have the first extant statement of the list of books that was subsequently accepted almost universally as canonical.\(^4\) We may grant that this process of gathering together these books and erecting a fence around them took place over a lengthy period of time after the books were written and that the books were not deliberately composed as a unified collection. Nevertheless, the fact that a consensus developed concerning them strongly supports the view that the early church was right to recognize that they had certain characteristics, which indicated that they formed a unity.

Second, the documents are the work of the earliest followers of Jesus, who were themselves, or stood in close relationship to, some of the original actors in the birth and growth of the church, and they all belong to the first Christian century.\(^5\) There is thus a basis for seeing a possible unity in the relatively limited area and time within which they were composed.

Third, the New Testament documents constitute virtually the whole of the surviving Christian literature of the first century, although some of the apostolic fathers (\textit{1 Clement; Didache}) probably belong to this period. The fact that there may be some overlap between the dates of the latest New Testament books and the earliest apostolic fathers (and other Christian literature of the same period) does not call in question the existence of the identifiable hard cores of both bodies of literature, just as a border dispute over the possession of Kashmir does not mean that the countries of India and Pakistan cannot be regarded as distinguishable entities. The basic distinction between first- and second-century Christian literature remains a valid one, even if the boundary is not sharply defined except by canon makers.

Fourth, there is a manifest unity of theme about the New Testament writings

\(^{4}\)This statement is controversial but defensible. For varying points of view see the articles on canon by F. F. Bruce, \textit{DJG}, pp. 93–100; Arthur G. Patzia, \textit{DPI}, pp. 85–92; and Lee M. McDonald, \textit{DLNTD}, pp. 134–44.

in that they are all concerned in one way or another with Jesus and the religion that developed around him. To be sure, this does not necessarily imply that they all say the same things about this common theme and are in agreement with one another. Nevertheless, a corpus of writings with the same central theme must constitute a legitimate object of study.

Fifth, it has sometimes been argued that the writings show a quality of Christian thought that is not matched in the later literature. Clearly this is a subjective verdict, and there could be a case that some of the second-century writings (e.g., the Epistle of Diognetus) stand very close to them in spirit and quality, but as a broad verdict the statement is defensible. Even so, I would not want to put much weight on this argument.

Our claim, then, is that it makes sense in the light of canonization to ask whether there is a common, basic theology in the set of books that the early church canonized.

To adopt this procedure, of course, does not lead to excluding other works outside the New Testament from consideration. In elucidating the content of the New Testament and in reconstructing the history of the period it is essential to make use of all other relevant sources, including other early Christian literature. This approach was especially characteristic of Ethelbert Stauffer, who placed the New Testament in the context of what he called the “old biblical tradition” and appeared on occasion to be in danger of regarding this extracanonical material almost as if it were canonical.\footnote{Ethelbert Stauffer, \textit{New Testament Theology} (London: SCM Press, 1955), p. 20.} If we are writing a history of the early church, then clearly all available sources are to be used; but if we are writing an account of the theology of the New Testament, then our task is to expound its contents, just as an exposition of the thought of Shakespeare will draw upon his writings but will do so in the context of the works of other Elizabethan playwrights, or an exposition of the founding fathers of the British Labor Party will draw upon their utterances but will do so in the context of other politicians of the time.\footnote{See further n. 13 on p. 26.}

\textit{Problems of Occasionality, Diversity and Development}

Turning now to Räisänen’s fourth point, we have to face a number of difficul-
ties in our study that arise out of the nature and history of the documents under investigation.

First, the New Testament library does not contain any ready-made textbooks of theology. None of the books is written specifically as a theology in the sense of an account of the author’s understanding of God and the world and their relationship to one another set out systematically in some detail. At least some of the writings are occasional or situational in that they were individually written on specific occasions to particular groups of people and give us what the writers thought to be relevant to these audiences. This is true, at least, of the letters of Paul. It is commonly thought that the Gospels were also written for specific individual communities, although this view may need some qualification. And it is patent that Paul regarded some, if not all, of what he wrote to individual congregations as material that could be useful to other congregations. But even if the books were more than narrowly occasional, it remains true that none of them is a full and systematic exposition of its author’s theology. It may, therefore, be impossible to analyze some of the writings with a view to determining the content of the author’s theology, and there may be occasions when it is doubtful how far the author even had a formed theology. Nevertheless, the difficulty of the task is not in itself an argument against the attempt to reconstruct theology from works that are not specifically theological.

Second, there is considerable variety and diversity among the books that compose the New Testament.

The period of composition referred to earlier as “short” in comparison with the length of subsequent church history can be seen from a different perspective as a relatively lengthy one (as much as fifty years), and the writings come from a wide geographical area, stretching from Jerusalem to Rome.

The writings differ from one another in literary genre, and the individual genres—Gospels, letters and apocalypses—are notoriously hard to define in terms of their characteristics.

The writings show considerable variety of outlook among themselves, so...
much so that some scholars would claim that they contain contradictory statements.

These points all raise the question whether there is sufficient unity of thought among the writings to justify examining them as a collection. But even if we cannot commence with the presupposition of unity of outlook, it does make sense historically to examine the corpus of earliest Christian literature in order to identify the theologies represented in it. This exercise would still be valid even if its result were to show that the supposed cohesion and unity are dubious. Whether we like it or not, there is such a collection of books as an object to be investigated.

Third, the writings are the fruit of a development in thinking that manifestly falls into at least two main stages.

The first stage. There is the very brief period of the activity of Jesus, terminated by his death in A.D. 30 or thereabouts. The four Gospels present themselves as historical records of this period, describing (as Luke puts it) what Jesus “did and taught”.

The second stage. There is the period after Jesus’ death during which his small group of followers increased in number and geographical extent, and formed congregations throughout the eastern Mediterranean world. They produced a literature that contains the Christian message, explained and applied to the needs of the first audiences. Their message, however, was not simply a continuation of what Jesus had taught but rather a proclamation about Jesus and his continuing significance. A superficial glance at the Gospels and the Letters shows that what Jesus taught and what his followers taught are far from being identical, no matter how much common ground there may be.

The division between the two stages is, of course, blurred by the fact that the Gospels were not written until the second stage (and, on the common view, comparatively late in it)\(^9\) so that inevitably they reflect to some extent the interests and outlook of that period. There is therefore a tricky historical problem in attempting to discover exactly what Jesus said and did, and how he would have appeared to people in his lifetime. There is the further problem caused by the fact that the various writings come from different

\(^9\)The universally accepted view is that Paul wrote his letters before the Evangelists wrote the Gospels.
times and places within the second stage, and we have the problem of trying to reconstruct the development of thought and their places within it. If we focus on the actual documents that compose the New Testament, we are dealing with items that stand in some kind of chronological development and cannot all be treated on the flat. And if we attempt to reconstruct the theology of the early church in the first century, we are even more committed to describing a rich tapestry of changing and developing ideas. But nothing here makes our task too complex to carry out or rules it out in principle.

**Approaches to the Task**

Bearing in mind these three points concerning the diversity of the material, we can try to define our subject more precisely, and to help us in so doing we must catalog some of the recent approaches to it.

It may be helpful to attempt a tentative definition of the object of our concern: the aim of students of New Testament theology is to explore the New Testament writers’ developing understanding of God and the world, more particularly the world of people and their relationship to one another. That is a sufficiently broad definition to cover the subject matter and yet to exclude certain other things or at least to recognize their secondary character.

Thus it excludes the attempt to write a history of the early church except insofar as aspects of the history contribute to the theological understanding that we are seeking.

Equally, it excludes examining the New Testament simply as a piece of literature, although again a literary study is often relevant to a theological investigation.

It also marks a difference from a study of the religion of the early Christians, although the religion is significant for our purpose in that the religion gave rise to the theology and in turn the theology tended to shape the practice of the religion.

There would not be too great a difficulty in constructing a theology of, say, the Free Church of Scotland in the twentieth century; we would produce a description of the characteristic, mature understanding of a specific, reasonably homogeneous and comparatively small group of Christians who are self-con-

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But certainly not excluding the animals and the inanimate creation!
sciiously aware of the need to be systematic in their theology and to base it firmly on the theology of the Reformation. A description of Anglican theology in the same period would be rather more difficult to produce in that there would be a much wider range of thinking and approach, with some groups in opposition if not contradiction to others, and yet there would be something that could be described as recognizably Anglican by contrast with Presbyterian or Roman Catholic theology.

But how does one deal with a period of birth and rapid growth in an extended family that comprises varied groups from Jews with their deep-rooted traditional beliefs to Greeks and Romans who had previously worshiped a variety of idols? There have been a number of approaches, some of which are more viable than others:

From what has already been said, it should be clear that we cannot simply lump all the books of the New Testament together indiscriminately and use them as a quarry for the stones, which we shall use to build our edifice. It would be possible to create a compilation of theological statements from the New Testament that was nothing more than a harmonizing assembly of quotations taken at random from any of its books. Such an approach would wrench the statements out of their contexts and lack the careful examination of their nuances to establish precisely what they were intended to affirm and imply. It would also assume that the quotations will all necessarily reflect the same point of view. But is a collection of texts a theology? There has to be some kind of arrangement. If so, how does one decide how to group the texts? To create a building rather than a cairn it is necessary to have some kind of plan or design.

Consequently, the first approach cannot in practice be separated from a second, accompanying tendency. This is to take over an existing plan such as is found in a textbook of systematic theology but without any firm evidence that this framework was in the minds of any of the New Testament authors. However, it has to be said that people who do this are usually quite convinced that their framework is that of the New Testament.

Two errors of method thus come together in this combination of approaches, the indiscriminate use of the books of the New Testament as if they all necessarily reflected identical thinking, and the use of a later framework as if it were that of the New Testament. The result can be distorting and
How Do We Do New Testament Theology?

anachronistic. It is fair to say that no serious student of the subject would take this route.\(^\text{11}\)

A third possibility, which avoids the dangers just mentioned, is to examine the individual authors or the individual writings in the New Testament, to set out the teaching of each of them on the various topics and to lay them side by side, with or without some comparison of their contents. This is the route followed by G. B. Caird. He sets out his work in the form of what he calls a “conference” between the different New Testament authors on various themes that arise naturally out of the New Testament itself and are not imported from later theology. He then compares them with the teaching of Jesus.\(^\text{12}\) I have no objections to this method, but Caird’s description of it as a conference seems to me to be a misnomer. “Conference” is not the most appropriate word for his procedure in that the word normally conveys the idea of a discussion with the different participants responding to what one another says. For Caird it is not really possible to offer more than position papers from each of the speakers without any indication of how, say, John would have responded to Paul. But if we may evaluate what is done rather than the misleading description given to it, the objective is entirely worthy in that Caird has identified what appear to be the guiding themes of the New Testament writers themselves, rather than the themes of a book of systematic theology, and set out the teaching of the several authors on each of them.

A fourth possibility is to approach the subject historically by attempting to trace the development of the ideas that have been deposited in the extant writings. This is a legitimate and necessary enquiry that may help to bring order to an apparent chaos by showing how the various expressions of different ideas may be related genealogically to one another, and there has been some progress in carrying out this process for individual theological motifs.

\(^{11}\)It would, of course, be hard to list any serious examples of this kind of approach by New Testament scholars. What I have described is rather a danger that is fairly well recognized. The work of Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981), tends toward using the pattern of systematic theology, but the author is too perceptive to be in real danger of misrepresenting the New Testament teaching as a result. In fact, within his discussion of individual doctrinal topics he goes through the material by treating the various New Testament authors or areas one by one. One is more likely to meet this approach in older conservative works of systematic theology that are basically compilations of biblical material.

Somebody has commented that if you are trying to solve a chess problem, of the kind where you have a diagram of a board with a few pieces on it and have to work out the winning move for White, it is not necessary to know what moves led to the position on the diagram. If, however, you are a doctor dealing with a patient showing certain symptoms of illness, part of the diagnosis will certainly be taking a medical history of the patient in order to understand what may have led to the ambiguous symptoms and to prescribe the appropriate cure. Study of New Testament theology is more akin to medical diagnosis with its tracing of a case history than to solving a chess problem. We need some understanding of the history in order to place the theological statements in a proper context.

The history to be explored will include the New Testament documents, the aim of the operation being to place them in some kind of chronological order so that the development of ideas can be pursued within the New Testament. But it will also look at what lies behind them so that the historical process can be properly reconstructed. If we adopt this approach, our concern cannot be limited to the theology of the New Testament writers but must extend to the underlying theology of the early church, including those Christians who have left no literary memorial of their own.\(^\text{13}\)

By way of example of this procedure we may note how Joachim Gnilka decided to include two sections on the theology of the hypothetical Gospel source Q and on the perhaps even more hypothetical pre-Markan passion nar-

\(^{13}\)There are four other areas that have to be brought into the discussion.
1. The non-Christian background against which the Christian theology developed. In what ways did the Christians take over ideas, motifs and vocabulary from the Jewish and the Greco-Roman world?
2. The role of Jesus as the founder of Christianity. What did he do and teach, and how did it influence his followers and guide their thought?
3. The complicated history of the early church before and alongside the written documents out of which developed the theology of the New Testament writers. What did Paul owe to those who were Christians before and alongside him?
4. The path to the written documents was not one of smooth, unilinear development. Paul and John, for example, developed some of their ideas in reaction to groups who held ideas with which they disagreed, and some account of these other groups and their thinking must be included as part of the essential background information for understanding the New Testament authors.

In order to keep this book to a reasonable size there will be little enough room here for the background material and particularly for introductory material that deals with the situations in and for which the different texts were composed.
rative in order to establish a basis for his consideration of how the Evangelists developed their ideas and what they meant by what they wrote. Regardless of whether we think that these hypothetical documents ever existed, the point at issue is simply that it is not possible to ignore the history whose literary deposit is found in the New Testament documents.  

Those who follow this route then find that their task is one that involves the two distinguishable stages of description and explanation. The description is the drawing out of the theological ideas expressed in the various writings. The explanation is the attempt to show how these ideas developed and thus how one author’s theology is related to that of another. Writers on Paul find it necessary to ask what was thought by other people, including other Christian believers before and alongside him, so that they can see to what extent Paul is taking over common ideas and to what extent he is being original.

Such an approach is not free from risks. One possible danger is that what is produced may be not so much a theology of the New Testament as rather an archaeological investigation into the hypothetical sources that lie behind it. We may finish up with the theology of some early Christians rather than that of the New Testament authors.

A further danger is that we may simply chart a development without producing any kind of synthesis of the material. This type of approach can be more concerned to elucidate how doctrines developed than to examine the finished product for its own sake. Yet it is surely possible to be aware of these risks and to attempt to minimize the dangers of succumbing to them.

It seems that the route most traversed by recent travelers is some version of the fourth route, which uses a historical or developmental framework as the main guide to the journey and groups the individual New Testament authors or writings historically.

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14See J. Gnilka, TheoLogie des Neuen Testaments (Freiburg: Herder, 1994), pp. 133-51. Strangely Gnilka also held that an account of the theology held by Jesus is not part of a work on New Testament theology. We may well wonder what led him to include these hypothetical sources and omit the very historical Jesus himself. Ferdinand Hahn, TheoLogie des Neuen Testaments, 2 vols. (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), includes not only an account of the historical Jesus but also discussions of the early Aramaic-speaking church and the early Hellenistic-Jewish Christian communities. This distinction between two groups in the early church was developed in his earlier work on christology and has been much criticized, but it is maintained here in a somewhat more cautious manner.
Getting Beneath the Surface

It would be possible simply to summarize the teaching of any of the various New Testament authors on the object of our concern and to do so with a sympathetic and nuanced understanding that considered statements in their context and in the light of their history. But such a summary would be like an artist’s painting of the human body or even a sculptured figure, which may portray the surface ever so exactly but does not begin to explain why the body has the structure it has or how the different parts work or how the outward appearance reflects the inner workings and the shape of what lies below the surface. We need some kind of principles for organizing the mass of teaching contained in the New Testament so that the structure and underlying rationale of the thinking become apparent.

Although the use of such terms as teaching and proclamation indicates that we are largely concerned with deliberate formulations in words, it would be folly to assume that this is all that we must consider. The books of the New Testament do not simply record teaching but also tell the story of the religious experience of the Christians, and understanding the experience is part of the task, not least because the teaching arises out of the experience. Stauffer is one of the few New Testament theologians who includes a chapter on prayer in his New Testament Theology and in so doing points up a blind spot in approaches that concentrate on proclamation and teaching. We are looking, therefore, not simply at teaching but also at an underlying history and an experience that express in their own way an understanding of our subject. So the theology of Paul is not simply a listing of what Paul says on the surface but rather an attempt to get at the contents of the mind that produced the literary deposit.

In essence, then, we are trying to grasp the understanding of God and his relationship to the world reflected in the various documents. We assume that the writer has such an understanding and that it comes to expression in a piece-meal or a more systematic manner in his writing(s). It then becomes possible

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16However much we may regret it, it remains the case that no New Testament writing can be confidently ascribed to the pen of a female writer. Attempts to do so for Hebrews and Revelation are scarcely successful. Therefore, I judge that it is permissible to use masculine pronouns in this context.
to analyze what is said in order to reconstruct this understanding.

The dangers of this process include that of systematization and tracing logical connections where these may be inappropriate; not all theologians had such orderly minds as Calvin! How do we avoid the temptation to project our systems onto the writers? There is also the temptation to bridge the inevitable gaps in our knowledge in ways that may be inappropriate or wrong; we can make the theology more complete and systematic than it actually was.

**Theologies and Theology**

The implication of what we have said so far is that the initial task of a theology of the New Testament is to make a collection of the theologies that may be presumed to come to expression in its various documents. But is a theology of the New Testament or of the early church simply a collection of studies of the theologies of different believers brought together within the covers of one book, or must there not be some comparison between them to establish whether the several theologies form a unity, sharing the same basic understanding, however much they may differ in the ways in which they express it or in the details of the content? It is surely the duty of the New Testament theologian to attempt some comparison of the outlooks of the writers in order to ascertain how far there is such an entity as the theology of the New Testament, and if so what this entity might be. Some writers assume the unity or begin by defending it and then proceed to use the whole of the New Testament as the basis for their study. Donald Guthrie offers summaries of the common teaching of the authors at the end of his depictions of their several understandings of each of the topics that he investigates. But some others offer the reader no such guidance.

Two related investigations need to be distinguished. The first is the attempt to relate the different theologies to one another by studying the development of theological thought and seeing where the various statements fit into it. This task is immensely complex and speculative, and we shall not attempt to carry it out in any detail in this book. The other task is the comparison of the differ-

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18This type of approach is classically adopted in the discussions of christology by Ferdinand Hahn, *The Titles of Jesus in Christology: Their History in Early Christianity* (London: Lutterworth, 1969), and Reginald H. Fuller, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology* (London: Lutterworth, 1965). Their work shows how speculative and difficult the task is.
ent theologies to establish the extent and nature of the unity and diversity.

Undoubtedly the main problem that faces the composer of a New Testament theology arises at this stage. It is the existence of variety within the writings. This may include the differences between different writers but also the fact of development and change within writings from the same author or from the same school of thought. That there are differences in modes of expression, in manners of thinking, in emphasis and so on is commonplace. There may also be contradiction, and for some modern authors the level of contradiction is such that we cannot speak of “New Testament theology” but only of “New Testament theologies” that may be in acute tension with one another.

There are some three possible ways of dealing with this kind of tension.

The first is to argue that it is totally irresolvable. Paul and James, for example, are opposed to one another, and there is no way that they can be made to agree.

The second way is to examine the alleged opposing statements or positions with care and to determine whether, when properly understood, they are in harmony with one another in what they affirm.

The third way is to determine whether, despite differences on the surface, there may be an underlying unity on a different level of perception.

Any of these three solutions may apply in individual cases, and not all problems will be solved in the same way.

It is the responsibility of the New Testament theologian to tackle this question. There must be two aspects to the discussion. On the one side, there is the duty of setting out the theologies of the several New Testament writers individually and sympathetically in all their difference and variety. On the other side, there is the duty of determining their relationship to one another, not just in terms of historical development but above all in terms of their theology: in what ways do they show a common mind and in what ways do they differ? Can we find a common outlook among them, and if so, how is it to be expressed?

Clearly the starting point must be to set out the thought expressed in the various documents, each for its own sake, before attempting any comparisons and detecting any tensions. It is a given fact that the New Testament comes to us in the form of discrete documents that are unrelated to one another except where one author may be responsible for a short series (like 1 and 2 Corinthians or Luke and Acts) or may write to different audiences (like Paul to different Christian congregations). In each case, therefore, the author is applying
his theology to a different, specific situation. There is thus a strong case that the beginning of the analysis must be an examination of each individual document for its implications about the theology of the writer. Only thus will justice be done to the richness of each individual contribution.

But then the analysis must be carried further into comparison and synthesis as we see how the writings fit or do not fit together. Thus variety and possible unity must alike be the objects of investigation.

Our conclusion is thus that a theology of the New Testament has two tasks: First, it will investigate the way in which the theological thinking of the early Christians, as deposited in these documents, came into being, analyzing the theologies that come to expression in each of the several documents or in appropriate groups of documents. Second, it will then enquire as to the existence and character of a possible synthesis that will bring out the common beliefs expressed in the documents and also show how they have individually developed these beliefs in different ways, so that we may see whether there is some kind of harmony between them or whether there are discords that cannot be resolved.

At the time when I originally wrote this chapter, there was no contemporary work that carried through this program in any detail. But now we have the work of Ferdinand Hahn, whose *Theologie des Neuen Testaments* comprises two substantial volumes, each of more than eight hundred pages, in which he deals first with the variety of the New Testament witnesses to Christ in a theological history of the material and then with the unity of the New Testament by means of a thematic presentation. Here, at last, we have an example of how the task might be done, but in far greater detail than is contemplated in the present work.

**Structuring the Material**

It has already been said more than once that the New Testament does not contain any textbooks of theology; there are no detailed creeds or confessions. The material is largely unstructured and occasional. Can there, then, be such a thing as a theology behind any of the writings, or is such an entity an artificial de-

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19 As indicated above, in view of the complexity of the task and the limitations of space in an introduction to the topic, we shall concentrate attention on accurately describing and analyzing the theology of the various documents rather than attempting to provide a history of the development of the thought.
duction from this material? Are we in danger of replacing the teaching of the New Testament by a putative theology that is alleged to lie behind it?

Consider the analogy of the head teacher of a school who has to deal with various problems of conduct that arise among the pupils. Some matters are covered by a set of school rules that have been drawn up to cover likely contingencies and some unlikely ones. At other times situations arise on which the head has to make ad hoc decisions. These decisions could be simply arbitrary, but more probably they reflect some general rules or some basic principles of which the rules are regarded as specific applications. The head may state on occasion what these basic principles are, or they may be deducible from the particular decisions. So it would be possible at least in theory to work back from the head’s decisions and occasional statements to an understanding of the principles accepted in the school and the ways in which they are applied.

At the risk of oversimplification it may be said that something similar can be done with the New Testament. We can read the particular teaching and instruction that is given in the various books, and we can try to work back from that to the underlying body of belief and the ways in which it is being used. We can see which applications are occasional and which are so frequent and consistent that they are manifestly basic.

The application is a product of the underlying beliefs and the specific situation to which they are being applied, and therefore the same fundamental beliefs may have different applications, differently nuanced, from time to time. This approach has been most clearly articulated by J. C. Beker in his analysis of the theology of Paul. Beker distinguishes between what he calls the coherent center and the contingent expression of Paul’s theology. Paul has a set of beliefs that articulate his Christian experience, and these could be expressed in a systematic manner, but what we have from him is the contingent expression of these beliefs as they apply to the particular situations that he was called to address in his letters. So the task of New Testament theology is to examine the actual writings to see what coherent centers they express and to show how the centers find expression in the applications.

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20. One danger of my illustration is that it may suggest that the New Testament is essentially a book of rules to be followed.

It may be helpful to elaborate the model by distinguishing three elements. First, a broad distinction can be made between the framework of a person's thinking and the specific thoughts developed within that framework. For example, there are certain types of ancient thought that presuppose the existence of a dualistic understanding of reality. Light and darkness, good and evil are familiar opposites, particularly when these are thought of as warring foes. But within the framework of dualistic thinking there can clearly be different systems of belief. There may be some who believe in the ultimate victory of light or in the triumph of evil. There may be different views as to the origin of the dualism; in some schemes the dualism could find expression within individual human beings. And those who believe in the ultimate victory of good may do so on the basis of a belief that the future is predetermined by the good power.

It is therefore necessary to ascertain whether different writers have different frameworks of thought and to determine what factors constitute a writer's frame of thinking. There is a difference, for example, between a basically legal frame of reference in which God is thought of primarily as a lawgiver to his subjects and a basically personal one in which he is thought of primarily as a Father who has a familial relationship with his children. The first gives rise to moral teaching that is essentially in the form of rules, whereas the other may be more concerned with promoting the imitation of a character (Lk 6:36).

The distinction between framework and content is a fluid one. One person's teaching may now become another person's framework. For example, in the Old Testament God is rarely thought of as Father but more often as the initiator of the covenant with his people. In the teaching of Jesus to his disciples the thought that God is Father is introduced in a new way; it is one of his concerns to reveal this fact to his disciples. But in the early church the fact that God is Father is then taken completely for granted and has become part of the framework for Christian thinking. The framework has thus shifted, and what Jesus presented as a new (but not entirely new) understanding of God, that is, as part of the content of his teaching, is now part of the framework which does not need to be taught or defended but is taken for granted. Within the framework

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22By contrast there are monistic systems of thinking which do not postulate an essential dualism. There are, of course, other forms of dualism, such as that between spirit and matter, which are different from the moral dualism referred to above.
there is scope for the presentation of further new ideas. So the New Testament writers grapple with the idea that within the framework of God's fatherhood there is a place for God the Son. Then once again the framework changes, so that eventually we have a trinitarian understanding of God over against a monistic framework.

The ways in which people think within their frameworks can then be explored. Here a further helpful distinction can be made between the main concern or concerns of the writer and the detailed outworking of the concern(s). By making this distinction we can pinpoint the focus of the thinking and avoid losing sight of the forest by only seeing the individual trees. For example, the detailed contents of the three Synoptic Gospels show considerable similarity and overlap, but attention to their main concerns helps us to recognize that they may have significant differences in the way in which they use their materials. Matthew emphasizes Jesus as a teacher, but John emphasizes him more as a revealer.

Framework, content or concern, and detailed outworking thus constitute the three categories that may be helpful to us. The distinctions between them are not sharp ones, but nevertheless they may be serviceable in attempting to analyze the thought of the New Testament writers.

The New Testament and Mission

It will be helpful in our study to have some idea of where the focus of the New Testament writings is to be found. Is there something that binds them together beyond the fact that they belong to the same period of time? The obvious answer is that they are all concerned with Jesus and the repercussions of his activity. They belong within the literature of Judaism but form a specific part of it in that they all accept that Jesus is the representative of God through whom he is acting to bring salvation to the world. They offer, therefore, a Christian theology as distinguished from a purely Jewish theology. It is, then, the recognition of Jesus as Savior and Lord that gives them their common characteristic.

It may, however, be more helpful to recognize them more specifically as the documents of a mission. The subject matter is not, as it were, Jesus in himself or God in himself but Jesus in his role as Savior and Lord. New Testament theology is essentially missionary theology. By this I mean that the documents came into being as the result of a two-part mission, first, the mission of Jesus
sent by God to inaugurate his kingdom with the blessings that it brings to people and to call people to respond to it, and then the mission of his followers called to continue his work by proclaiming him as Lord and Savior, and calling people to faith and ongoing commitment to him, as a result of which his church grows. The theology springs out of this movement and is shaped by it, and in turn the theology shapes the continuing mission of the church. The primary function of the documents is thus to testify to the gospel that is proclaimed by Jesus and his followers. Their teaching can be seen as the fuller exposition of that gospel. They are also concerned with the spiritual growth of those who are converted to the Christian faith. They show how the church should be shaped for its mission, and they deal with those problems that form obstacles to the advancement of the mission. In short, people who are called by God to be missionaries are carrying out their calling by the writing of Gospels, letters and related material. They are concerned to make converts and then to provide for their nurture, to bring new believers to birth and to nourish them to maturity.

Here what happens in Luke-Acts may serve as an example of what is true of the New Testament as a whole. W. C. van Unnik offered a convincing explanation of the relationship between the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. He saw the Gospel as the record of the good news proclaimed by Jesus in word and deed, and he then characterized Acts as “the confirmation of the gospel”, a record telling the story of the mission in such a way as to show how, when the gospel was proclaimed by the missionaries, it was seen to be truly the gospel in that it brought salvation to those who responded to it. The New Testament thus tells the story of the mission and lays especial emphasis on expounding the message proclaimed by the missionaries.

A recognition of this missionary character of the documents will help us to see them in true perspective and to interpret them in the light of their intention. They are at one and the same time the product of a dynamic process of evangelism and nurture, and the tools for accomplishing that pro-

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24 At the risk of estranging my colleagues in Old Testament studies, I would suggest that this characteristic shape of the New Testament distinguishes it from the Old Testament, where, although the missionary motif is by no means absent, it certainly could not be said to exercise a decisive influence over the action generally.
25 Call it the author’s intention or the text’s intention, as you wish!
cess. It is the recognition of this organizing principle that enables us to have a coherent understanding of them. Essentially the New Testament is a collection of books that express the gospel or good news that was proclaimed in the Christian mission. Thus David Wenham suggests “that New Testament theology is all about the divine mission to the world”, and he argues that it can be structured in terms of the context, center, community and climax of mission.

Adoption of this guiding proposal means that we do not make the mistake of seeing the theology of the New Testament as primarily ecclesiastical or ecclesiological, that is, of seeing the central interest as being the church and its life and its structures, although that is not entirely mistaken. Recognition of the missionary orientation of the New Testament will alert us to a more dynamic view of the church as the agent of mission instead of the static view that we sometimes have. Nor is the interest of the New Testament primarily in christology for its own sake, but rather in the function of Christ as God’s agent in bringing about reconciliation. We shall also be enabled to avoid a one-sided understanding of the Holy Spirit as the agent of sanctification and to pay proper attention to the Spirit’s role in empowering and directing the church for mission and growth.

Elsewhere we shall have cause to note more than once the important and very helpful classification of three aspects of the action in the New Testament made by Stauffer; he notes the doxological, antagonistic and soteriological facets of what happens—the elements of glorifying God, overcoming evil and saving the lost. There is a natural tendency to give primacy to the doxological on the grounds that the highest activity of human beings is to glorify God and even what God does is intended to increase his glory. That is correct, but since the glorification of God should be the ultimate aim of all our activity, a stress on glorification may fail to express what is especially characteristic of the New Testament, namely, that the specific way in which God is glorified is through mission. Ultimately the main concern of God’s people

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should be to glorify him, but recognition of this obligation does not require that this is the main theme of the New Testament; the New Testament is primarily about God’s mission and the message that is associated with it. Similarly, the antagonistic motif is clearly of great importance, in that the powers of evil and death must be overcome if humanity is to be rescued, but this victory is not an end in itself: the triumph of the crucified must be proclaimed to humankind and become a reality for them—through mission. Again, soteriology is understood in a one-sided manner if attention is centered purely on the work of Christ as if it were an end in itself. It is significant that in Paul the fact of reconciliation achieved by the death of Christ and the proclamation of reconciliation by his messengers (leading to the human acceptance of reconciliation) belong together as the two essential and integral parts of God’s saving action.

To identify the underlying rationale of the New Testament in this way is not to state what might be regarded as an arbitrary presupposition for study; rather it is a thesis to be tested by the investigation, a proposition to be tried out to see whether it is justified by the results of the study rather than a procrustean bed into which we try to fit everything regardless of whether it fits. The reader should understand, therefore, that this section of the introduction was written (as all good introductions should be) after the substance of the book was completed and it was becoming clearer what the results of the study were.

The New Testament as Part of the Bible
The New Testament is not freestanding. Along with the Old Testament it forms part of the Christian Bible. It arose in the historical context of the work and teaching of Jesus and the development of the early Christian church. It stands at the beginning of the historical development of systematic, dogmatic theology. It remains to consider each of these three relationships and their relevance for the task.

If we consider the New Testament as part of the Bible, some important and unavoidable questions arise that lead in turn to two or three related tasks.

First, the early Christians saw themselves as the heirs of the religion expressed in the Old Testament and in Judaism. They came to think of themselves as standing in continuity with the people who worshiped the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and whose literary expression is what they came to call the Old
An essential enquiry, therefore, is to determine the relationships between the two Testaments: in particular, how did the New Testament writers understand the Old Testament and make use of it?

Second, would it be possible and indeed preferable to write a biblical theology or theology of the whole Bible rather than simply a theology of either Testament? This would be a mammoth task, rendered the more difficult by the fact that Old Testament scholars don’t show a lot of agreement about how to write a theology of their own Testament. Such a work would have the same problems that occur in dealing with either Testament on its own, the problem of dealing with a large body of literary works from a very wide period of time, with a wide range of literary forms and with a huge range of ideas, many of which may appear to be contradictory, some primitive and some more highly developed. Nevertheless, the aim is to be welcomed as representing a desirable goal, and there are at least two attempts to date to fulfill it.

Third, a less ambitious task is indicated in the titles of books that attempt to write a biblical theology of the New Testament. What this means is that there is a recognition that the roots of the thinking of the New Testament writers lie in the Old Testament (and its transmission within the literature of Judaism) and that one task of the theologian is to lay bare the roots and to show how they have determined the way in which the tree has grown and borne fruit. The work of Hans Hübner is a detailed attempt to carry out this program, but with the tendency to concentrate on this aspect of New Testament theology only and to leave on one side other material. A broader and more satisfying approach is that of Peter Stuhlmacher, whose two-volume treatment is governed by the principle that “the theology of the New Testament is to be designed as a biblical theology of the New Testament that takes its origin from the Old Testament.”

28 Until comparatively recently among Christians the two parts of the Christian Bible have been known as the Old and New Testaments. Many people feel that this nomenclature implies a verdict upon the earlier Testament that is insensitive to those who also accept it as Scripture but do not accept the Christian faith. Hence the neutral term “Hebrew Bible” has come into use as a term that Jews and Christians can share. The term is not an entirely happy one in that its antithesis might appear to be the “Greek Bible”, a term that however refers to the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek. Within this book, which is concerned with how Christians understand the earlier body of Scriptures we shall retain the traditional method of reference.

How Do We Do New Testament Theology?

Testament and is open to it and is to be understood as a part of a biblical theology that considers the Old and New Testaments together. Stuhlmacher is right: a study of New Testament theology should be concerned to trace the characteristics that arise out of the ingredients that have been worked and shaped to give it its present form.

What is at issue perhaps is a question of focus. The present project would become unmanageable in length and would stray far outside the author’s competence if it were to attempt a biblical theology of the Bible. However, a theology of the New Testament must surely be a biblical theology of the New Testament since there is no way that we can avoid the fact that the thinking of the New Testament writers is shaped by the Old Testament in two ways. The one is that they are all Jews, whether by birth or in their way of thinking, and therefore they are thinking within the framework of a Judaism that was shaped by the Old Testament. The other is that they make their own distinctive and deliberate forays into the Old Testament in order to develop their theology. The influence of the Old Testament is not that of an environment passively accepted but rather of a quarry enthusiastically mined.

It is appropriate here to refer to one of the shortest but most seminal books of modern New Testament study, C. H. Dodd’s *According to the Scriptures*. Dodd did two things in this book. The first of them, widely recognized and debated, was his claim that rather than going to selected, isolated proof texts in the Old Testament, the New Testament writers went to selected fruitful areas within which they found material that they understood in a contextual manner. The second point, which is perhaps only now receiving due recognition, is that Dodd argued that this activity with the Old Testament formed what he called the “sub-structure” of New Testament theology, by which I take it he meant that the Old Testament provided the New Testament writers with the key categories and broad structure of a theology for which the major structure was given by the saving history which they interpreted so as to bring out its innate significance. The substructure is ad-

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30Peter Stuhlmacher, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 2 vols. (Göttingen: Vandenhoek & Ruprecht, 1992, 1999), i.5. A translation of this comprehensive work into English is an urgent necessity.

31The first and the third tasks are complementary in that the first asks how the New Testament writers understood the Old Testament and the third asks how the Old Testament influenced the thought of the New Testament writers.
mittedly much more determinative in some writings than in others, and it may function in different ways, but of its presence and importance there can be no doubt. It follows that an account of New Testament theology will inevitably offer a biblical theology in that we cannot avoid showing how the biblical revelation as a whole is related to that particular cross-section we call the New Testament.

**The Place of Jesus in New Testament Theology**

It is well known that the most famous New Testament theology of the twentieth century, that of Rudolf Bultmann, deliberately put the teaching of Jesus on one side as a presupposition of New Testament theology rather than as part of its content and gave it the minimum of discussion.

There is a trivial sense, of course, in which Bultmann was right. If we are writing a theology of the New Testament, Jesus was not one of its authors, and therefore his thinking and teaching are not the thinking and teaching of a New Testament author. Equally, when Bultmann included a much lengthier discussion of the kerygma of the earliest church and of the Hellenistic church, he consistently also made this part of the “Presuppositions and Motifs of New Testament Theology” rather than part of the theology itself.

However, there is a stronger argument, namely, that Jesus was not a Christian theologian. Christian theology, it can be claimed, is the thinking of Christians about Jesus, and it is not hard to defend the view that it is centered on his death and resurrection and their implications; Jesus, however, was concerned with the kingdom of God and only indirectly with himself, and only rarely with his own future. Jesus, therefore, was doing something different from his followers, and this is an additional reason for not regarding him as a Christian theologian.

Nevertheless, this argument can be refuted by the observation that the teaching of Jesus is taken up into the New Testament by the Evangelists in their Gospels. They considered it to be their task to relate much of what he said and, in so doing, to accept it as part of their own message. We shall have to follow this route. In a book on New Testament theology the emphasis must lie on the teaching of the actual authors, but attention must also be paid to Jesus himself as one of the major sources of their thinking. But how should this be done?

Here we must note that the Evangelists thought it important not merely to record the teaching of Jesus but also to present his life story, or rather those
parts of it that they considered to be relevant to their audiences, at length and thematically in their Gospels.  
It is highly significant that at a time when many of the letters had already been written and some were presumably known more widely than simply in their original destinations, there were Christian believers who felt that it was necessary to record how they saw and understood the life of Jesus. This shows, incidentally, that although one can be an early Christian theologian, like Paul, and say next to nothing about the life and teaching of Jesus, the early church was ultimately unsatisfied with this and the theology of the letters was seen in the wider context of the integration of the life and teaching of Jesus into the theological works that we know as the Gospels. Thus the historical Jesus and his teaching find their way into the New Testament and so into its theology primarily through the medium of the Gospels.

We could say, then, that the historical Jesus is relevant to New Testament theology at three levels.

First, Jesus is the historical person whose activity and message, more than that of anybody else, formed and shaped the church, and therefore he has as much right to be heard for his own sake as Paul or John, and certainly far more than any hypothetical unknown figures who bridge the gap between him and the earliest New Testament writers.

Second, his historical activity is the starting point from which developed the whole Christian movement and its thought and practice, and therefore a study of his influence is appropriate. In this sense, Jesus is the presupposition of the theology of his followers.

Third, Jesus is the subject of reflection in the Gospels, and therefore the writings of the Evangelists must be considered as a significant part of the search for the theology of the New Testament.

In terms of these three levels of approach Bultmann treated the message of Jesus only at the second level. He somehow managed to overlook the third level.

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32It has become traditional to refer to this as the “ministry” of Jesus, probably on the basis of the way in which he spoke of his role as one of a “servant” (Gk. διακονός; Lat. minister). It may be better to think of it as his mission, since this term conveys more clearly the content of the activity of Jesus in his capacity as God’s representative (“apostle”, Heb 3:1) among human beings.

33To call the Gospels theological works is in no sense to deny that they are historical works concerned to relate what happened, and the remarkable thing in the case of the Synoptic Gospels at least is that the historical facts required so little interpretation in order to function as early Christian theology.
and thus provided a classical example of how a developmental approach to New Testament theology could blind a scholar to the need to look at the finished products. He also, of course, could be said to have amalgamated the first level with the second (rather than totally omitting it), but part of the reason for the brevity of his treatment lay in a combination of his skepticism regarding the greater part of the record and his conviction that the history of what Jesus did was irrelevant for Christian faith; what mattered was the existential challenge that came over in the few sayings that can be certainly traced to his lips.

It would seem, then, that the appropriate method to follow would be the admittedly repetitious one in which Jesus is discussed in his own right at levels one and two, but also the contributions of the Evangelists are discussed subsequently in their own right. However, the first part of this task faces a serious practical difficulty, namely, to what extent it is possible to offer a justified and well-founded reconstruction of the work and message of Jesus without bursting the limits appropriate to a book on New Testament theology. Such a reconstruction is a major historical problem in terms of extent and complexity, and there is much to be said for treating it on its own rather than including it in a treatment such as the present one. There continues to be a major difference in scholarship between those who hold that the Synoptic Gospels offer a substantially reliable picture of how Jesus acted and spoke, and those who believe that the Gospel accounts are unreliable and that the historical Jesus was significantly different from the Gospel portraits of him; I have expressed my consid-

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34 This is the path followed by Leonhard Goppelt, *Theology of the New Testament*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1981, 1982), who discussed Jesus in great detail in volume 1 of his work and included Matthew and Luke in volume 2. According to his editor, J. Roloff, he left no material on Mark because he did not consider himself able at this stage in scholarship to take a mature view of this Gospel.

35 The danger is that to do justice to the historical problems means that they can dominate the discussion and prevent the scholar from ever reaching the theology! This happened with Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology: The Proclamation of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1971), and to a lesser extent with Goppelt; yet the example of Stuhlmacher, *Biblische Theologie*, shows that this need not happen. Contrast the work of Ferdinand Hahn, who discusses the proclamation and work of Jesus without entering into the historical questions to any extent, with the result that some of his guiding principles (especially that the christological “titles” do not go back to Jesus himself) are simply stated without argument; in this case, however, the author had dealt with the matter at great length in his earlier monograph, *The Titles of Jesus*. Hahn takes an important step forward in asking not only what the message and story of Jesus were (insofar as the historian can reconstruct them) but also how they were incorporated in the witness of the disciples and the early church (Hahn, *Theologie*, 1: 43).
ered opinion in favor of the former possibility elsewhere, and I shall prescind from further detailed justification of it here.\textsuperscript{36} I shall therefore compromise by taking the opposite option from that adopted by Bultmann and shall discuss the theology of Jesus as it is presented to us by the Evangelists on the well-founded assumption that the Synoptic presentations of Jesus are sufficiently close to historical reality to enable us to use them to understand his mission and message.\textsuperscript{37}

**New Testament Theology and Systematic Theology**

Problems of a different kind arise when we consider the relation of this investigation to the modern world. The systematic analysis of Christian beliefs is sometimes called dogmatic theology. This term is intended to describe a theology that is not so much a description of what Christians believe as rather what they ought to believe. There are such things as creeds and confessions, which have a prescriptive character within Christian communities. Is a work on New Testament theology descriptive or prescriptive? We need to distinguish here between a book on New Testament theology, which in itself cannot be prescriptive, and New Testament theology itself, which must have some relevance to the theology of Christian believers. What may be possible is to present the teaching of the New Testament and say that it is prescriptive, subject to the condition that the modern author has correctly understood and depicted it. But clearly it would only be prescriptive for those who belong to a community of faith that includes the author and all those who believe that the New Testa-


\textsuperscript{37}The reader will observe that I have not included the Gospel of John at this point. In view of the differences in “idiom” in the presentation of Jesus there, it is methodologically preferable to set it on one side and consider it separately from the Synoptic Gospels at a later point.
ment is, or rather is part of, Christian Scripture, which is true and authoritative for them and in their opinion ought to be so for humankind generally.\textsuperscript{38}

Yet the prescriptive element is hard to eliminate. The modern author who believes that (some of) the statements in the New Testament are true will consider himself or herself to be passing on teaching that is true and valid for the readers. Equally there are modern authors who may point out the contradictions that they find within the New Testament and nudge the readers toward the statements that they consider to be more worthy of belief and away from those which are less acceptable. Or the modern author may feel free to interpret the statements in a way that the ancient author would not have recognized. And the modern author may be quite unconsciously constrained in these directions by forces of which he or she is unaware, being a child of the contemporary age. This particularly arises in relation to the ethical teaching of the New Testament, where the tendency to make it fit into one’s own set of principles is all the stronger and the more difficult to detect.

The effect is that the author then becomes a deliberate interpreter of the New Testament as opposed to being the unconscious interpreters that we cannot avoid being. Authors may simply say that the teaching of the New Testament is to be taken as it stands and accepted by the church today. That in itself is a form of interpretation. They may also attempt some kind of process to re-interpret those parts of New Testament theology which they believe to be expressed in a time-bound manner so as to avoid misunderstanding, and they may try positively to re-express the message in such a way that it will speak to modern people. Provided that they are aware that this is what they are doing and are as self-conscious as possible about the procedure, then this approach is surely valid, if not unavoidable.\textsuperscript{39}

The New Testament must be understood first of all and as far as possible on its own terms, as an expression of thought within the ways that were possible in the first century. These ways may be different from our own, shaped by subsequent centuries of intellectual development. Inevitably we tend to accept those ways of thinking that cohere with our own and to reject those that do not.

\textsuperscript{38}The situation of the author is the same as that of Christian preachers who believe that they are called by God to proclaim and teach the gospel but recognize that this calling does not make them infallible.

\textsuperscript{39}This seems to me to be the case whether or not one believes that the Bible is infallible in its teaching.
not. If the New Testament writers had not yet envisaged a heliocentric framework within which a spherical earth rotates round the sun but believed in a flat earth at the center of the universe, then there is no way that modern people are going to share their physical framework of thought. But what do we do with the belief in the existence of God, which is confidently denied by many in the vanguard of modern thought, or the existence of supernatural actors and the reality of supernatural actions that might be denied by even more people? May there not be some extent to which the modern framework is challenged by the New Testament one?

Scholars who insist that New Testament scholars step out of their legitimate area when they write theology are recognizing that what is being done is in some sense prescriptive and are arguing that they should confine themselves to history. This distinction is ultimately based on the separation between historical and dogmatic theology that can be traced back to a famous essay by J. P. Gabler (1787). However, it must be remembered that what motivated Gabler was the fettering of scholarship by the ecclesiastical orthodoxy of the time, and the value of his distinction was that it enabled scholars to study the theology of the New Testament unfettered by the need to provide an account that was in line with the theology of the contemporary church. But it is doubtful whether that danger is present today; granted that there are some institutions within which teachers must adhere to a party line, it is normally the case that scholars are not bound to any declarations of dogmatic theology that would prevent them from dealing honestly with the text. Rather there is the possibility of fruitful dialogue in which New Testament scholars can speak to the church and vice versa.

Balla’s defense of the study over against the criticism of Räisänen is, as we saw, to claim that what we are providing is essentially a descriptive account of the theological thinking of the early Christians, that is, a historical task. I think that this is a fundamentally sound riposte. Nevertheless, some of us do under-

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40I find it very hard to avoid the use of this term modern to refer to my contemporaries, even though some would insist that we have now moved on into a postmodern period. The thinking of all of us, whether we admit it or not, is shaped too significantly by contemporary thought, and it is this difference between ancient thought and contemporary thought that I have primarily in mind when I use the word modern in a broad sense that does not exclude so-called postmodern thinking.

take this task as Christians and do so within the context of the Christian community to which we belong. Doing theology is properly a Christian activity carried out ideally within the community of faith, as Francis Watson in particular has cogently and correctly argued. But if what I have said about the freedom enjoyed by scholars within the church is true, then there is no need for scholars to keep their scholarship and their faith in separate compartments and never let either influence the other.

It follows that the approach to be taken here is in close sympathy with that advocated by Watson, who laments the fragmentation of the studies of Old Testament theology, New Testament theology and systematic theology to the detriment of each of the three enterprises.

_A Proposal Regarding Procedure_

If we now put this all together, I suggest that the following guidelines are emerging for the construction of a New Testament theology.

The scope of the work is the books of the New Testament. The task is defined by the canon.

The books must be understood in the context provided by the Jewish Scriptures; the thought of the contemporary world, especially that of Judaism but not excluding the wider Hellenistic world; the development of early Christian thinking, including currents of theology rejected as well as those accepted by the New Testament authors; the later Christian writings which take us further along the trajectories that pass through the New Testament. The task must be conducted contextually and so biblically.

As the fundamental context for the development of early Christian thinking we must pay full attention to the activity and teaching of Jesus, while recognizing that the methodological problems are so great that they cannot be handled fully within the limitations of this book. The task must include jesuology as well as christology.

As a further part of the context we must handle the documents in the setting of the Christian mission by Jesus and by his followers out of which they have arisen. Our interpretation must be missiological.

The starting point must be the attempt to elucidate the theology of the in-

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individual documents as expressions of the writers’ theology directed to specific occasions or purposes and from them to work back to the core beliefs. This is the stage of description.

At this and all stages it will be helpful to recognize the distinction between the assumed framework of a writer’s theology, the central thrust of his theology and the more detailed outworking of it. Nevertheless, this heuristic tool must not be applied in an over-rigid manner. This is the stage of analysis.

When this has been done, it will be possible to explore to some extent the way in which these various expressions of theology have developed, while avoiding the temptation to be diverted into an attempt to write a history of New Testament theology. This is the stage of studying development.

It is important, however, to remember that we are dealing with a collection of books that was the object of canonization, and therefore it is essential to determine the ways in which these books display common beliefs and variety of beliefs and whether they constitute an essentially harmonious collection or stand in tension or even contradiction at various points. This is the stage of attempting synthesis.

A conceivable further stage is to discuss in what ways the theology as a whole and in its several parts has been and should be taken up into the dogmatic theology of the church. We may call this application. We shall have quite sufficient on our plate without attempting this further task, and in any case this is an area for cooperation between the New Testament scholar and the systematic theologian rather than for the former to attempt it alone.

In this book, then, I shall concentrate more on describing and analyzing the theologies of the New Testament books and their authors, and considering whether the evidence entitles us to speak of a unified theology of the New Testament. My procedure will be to start with the Synoptic Gospels and their presentation of the mission and teaching of Jesus, followed by Acts; the next major section of the book will be devoted to the Pauline letters, followed by the Johannine literature, and finally the remaining books of the New Testament.

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