



New Testament Theology

A new study of the thematic
structure of the New Testament

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MENTOR





New Testament work and citation are based on *Greek-English New Testament*. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1981. The Greek text is that of Nestle-Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, the 26th revised edition, 1979.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS



cf.	Confer (compare)
ff.	Following
ESV	English Standard Version
KJV	King James Version
n.b.	Nota bene (note)
NIV	New International Version
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
RSV	Revised Standard Version

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Preface

I taught “New Testament Survey” at the undergraduate level from 1970-2000 in three different institutions. At the Wheaton (IL) College Graduate School “New Testament Theology” was my beloved responsibility from 1977-2000. I looked in vain for a survey of New Testament teachings somewhere between the elementary level and that of a specialized, technical New Testament theology. Such an intermediate study would serve as a capstone for the beginning survey course, and the initial assignment to help classes of graduate students to attain approximately the same level. Relatively early I began preparing outlines and then annotating them to fulfill these functions.

The initial draft of the present manuscript was completed during a 1993-1994 sabbatical leave, spent with my wife, Florence and our son’s dog, Sydney. We lived in a remote cabin, out from Otto, in Macon County, North Carolina, in the beautiful southern Appalachian Mountains. That location provided an ideal setting for reflecting on the material I have studied and taught for decades.

Since that time my *New Testament Theology* has been duplicated several times for use in my classes at Wheaton College. Corrections and additions preceded each new duplication. During the spring of 1999 the entire manuscript was carefully and professionally edited by Carol Freeze Berry, then of the Distance Learning Department of Wheaton College. Since retiring in 2000 I have continued to “tweak” the content and form of the manuscript.

Use of this material in the classroom confirmed my conviction of the need for such a work and that *New Testament Theology* can get the job done. A number of teachers, pastors, and laypersons beyond the walls of Wheaton College and the shores of the U.S.A. have used *New Testament Theology*. A complete translation exists in the Bulgarian language and is being duplicated for use in that country. (By means of which I am not completely sure, this *New*





Testament Theology found its way into Bulgaria from Romania!). Parts of the manuscript have been translated into Spanish for use in student work.

I send out this little book on a big subject with the prayer that it may be useful and helpful to twenty-first century pilgrims as they strive to make progress in the way of the cross, toward the celestial city.

Black Mountain, North Carolina
Summer 2007





Acknowledgements

The opportunity to acknowledge and thank friends and associates for their help and encouragement is one of the pleasures of completing a manuscript like this. There are many who deserve note and expressions of appreciation. Most must go unnamed; some cannot.

Julius and Laverne, Mamma and Daddy, knew little of formal Biblical studies but taught eloquently by living out Biblical teachings before their children. I am also fortunate to have a very supportive extended family. Their continuing interest has been of more help and encouragement than they can know. My brother, David W. Scott, of Atlanta, Georgia has been of immense help in assisting me to view things through the eyes of an informed layperson and has made important, appropriate suggestions. My sister and brother-in-law, Mary and Jack Ward of Atlanta, Georgia and my sister-in-law, Mary Elizabeth Swayze of Ridgeland, Mississippi, have been particularly faithful in asking about the progress of this project, encouraging the writer, and/or in praying for me as I worked on this manuscript. My late uncle, Clifford B. Schonert, a retired farmer of Bow Island, Alberta, Canada, read the manuscript in an earlier edition and shared it with friends there. His positive reaction and reports encouraged me by confirming the potential usefulness of this survey.

I have had three mentors. Professor William Childs Robinson of Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, GA, introduced me to a form of New Testament theology as he directed attention to the Biblical and historical meaning of important New Testament words. Dr. John R. Richardson, a godly pastor for whom I worked as student assistant, gave constant examples of the importance of careful scholarly work as the background for pulpit work. Dr. Richardson contributed greatly to my life in another area when he presided at the ceremony which united me in marriage to his daughter. Space would fail me to even try to express my gratitude for the influence of my doctoral supervisor, Professor F. F. Bruce, then Rylands



Professor of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis at the University of Manchester, England. His learning was unquestioned, as were his personal devotion and piety by all who knew him. His teaching and friendship, both in person and through his writings, continue to shape profoundly my thought and life. Robert A. Kraft is another from whose tutelage I benefited at the University of Manchester, 1961-63; our friendship has continued since he joined the faculty of the University of Pennsylvania.

The major direct impetus and influence behind the structure and content of this book are the students I have taught formally and informally, in classrooms, churches, and elsewhere for more than four decades. I wish I could thank each one personally and by name. There are, however, three who, although they have sat in my classrooms, I also taught in other ways and settings; their names are listed in first section of the dedication page.

Certain individuals have been of direct assistance, both in general and specifically, in the making of this book. At times I have turned to them for general advice and for precise answers. Professor Walter A. Elwell, with whom I taught for almost thirty years. The results of innumerable talks and discussions dot almost every chapter. In 1970 Professor Gordon D. Fee was a teaching colleague. He continues to be a friend. During our times together I have learned much and from him received support and encouragement.

Dr. Robert Yarbrough, now of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, IL, is a former student and colleague, always a close friend. He has generously shared observations and insights about New Testament Theology so that both I as the teacher and the students who enrolled in my courses after him are much the richer. Robert D. Carlson, a supportive friend, an unusual Christian layman with a profound knowledge of the Greek New Testament, has frequently shared his insights. He has read the entire manuscript several times and contributed both in content and in correcting spelling and other technical mistakes.

Additional help and encouragement has come from other friends, Dr. J. Knox Chamblin, retired Professor of New Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary, Dr. John N. Akers, former teaching

colleague, now long time Special Assistant to Dr. Billy Graham, and Wheaton colleagues. Professors C Hassell Bullock and Gene Green, as well as Mr. Larry Fuhrer of Naperville, IL.

Since I my initial classes in “New Testament Theology” at Wheaton College Graduate School I have used *A Theology of the New Testament*¹ by George E. Ladd as primary textbook. Working with and through that volume for more than a decade and a half has placed me in his debt far more than I can adequately document. Also, I regard Rudolf Bultmann, Oscar Cullmann, C. H. Dodd, and Joachim Jeremias as the “giants” of creative New Testament studies in mid-twentieth century. I am indebted to each in different ways. I also learned from such scholars as A. M. Hunter, Ethelbert Stauffer, G. E. Kümmel, Leonhardt Goppelt, Earl E. Ellis, Leon Morris, Donald Guthrie, and I. Howard Marshall. The same could be said of many others whose legacy has also come primarily in written form. I appreciate the support and insights gleaned from those with whom I share basic commitments and outlook; at the same time I have often learned much from those with whom I disagree.

Most of the work on this book was completed while I was on sabbatical leave during the 1993-94 academic year graciously made available by Wheaton College. While writing in North Carolina I was exposed to the influence of an unusually gifted preacher, Rev. Tom Schmitt, then pastor of the Emmanuel Presbyterian Church of Franklin, NC. Tom has a high respect for and loyalty to the Biblical text. His expository method depends heavily upon Biblical concepts and teachings. Within this framework he explains the meaning of the text and then applies it pointedly and meaningfully to the needs of his congregation in the modern world. From this younger man, I, the elder professor, was spiritually blessed and learned much about the text and its contemporary application. He gave me fresh assurance of the importance and relevance of what I try to do in this book. The same is true of my present pastor, Rev. Dr. Richard White, of the Montreat Presbyterian Church, EPC, Montreat, NC.

¹ Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993).



Most influential and helpful has been an elect lady with broad theological training, both informal and formal. She, while studying for her MA in theology, was a student in several of my classes, including “New Testament Theology.” She is a person with both profound spiritual and common sense. I have discussed virtually every issue in the book with her, she has made perceptive criticisms and suggestions, and given solid advice. Florence has been my first and major proofreader and editor. Nevertheless, her influence upon me did not begin during her graduate studies or with this project. Florence, is my constant colleague, collaborator, advisor, wife, and best friend. The day we moved into our sabbatical mountain retreat we celebrated the thirty-fifth anniversary of our marriage. It’s her book too!

I have sought to keep footnotes and other non-biblical references to a minimum. I realize that some people are intimidated by the presence of even a few footnotes; to them I offer a word of advice, ignore them! The content of the book does not require reading them.



Introduction

In this book we assume readers have or are in process of obtaining some basic awareness of the New Testament, its structure, and contents. Such a ‘survey-level’ may involve an awareness of the overall sweep of the latter part of Biblical history, of major people and events, of the general content of each New Testament book, and how the books and other parts fit into the whole. Here we focus upon the major themes of the New Testament. This includes an introduction to the relationship between the various parts and how they join together to convey essential points of Biblical teaching.

Another element in Biblical studies involves some familiarity with the principles and procedures for understanding and interpreting the Bible, a book from another time and place, and applying it to the contemporary world and life in it. We will have to assume and utilize some of this data without much discussion of it. For those interested there is a variety of good introductory works on this subject.¹

The Whole Counsel of God

The importance of this step is reflected by Paul as he spoke to the elder-overseers of the church of Ephesus who had come to meet him at the port of Miletus (Acts 20:17-38). Paul knew that in a very short time he would leave these people and that the separation would

¹Hermeneutics is the name given this field of study; see R. C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977); Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002); Henry A. Virkler, *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1981); Dan McCartney and Charles Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand: A Guide to Interpreting and Applying the Bible* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1994); and Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996). Knowledge of and careful use of responsible hermeneutical procedures can be of great help to the Bible reader. However, theories and techniques cannot replace the work of God’s Spirit working along with his word.

be permanent – he and they, in this life, would see each other no more. During his third missionary journey, Paul had spent more than three years in Ephesus preaching, teaching, admonishing, caring. Hence, these were individuals in whom he had invested much: time, spiritual and physical labour, emotional energy, and prayer. And, he loved them; loved also those for whom they were responsible. What should he do? What must he say? It was necessary for him to encourage and provide a review of his work and teaching. Paul knew his words must challenge and provide help to those who must both grow in the faith and live in a hostile world. He also realized the necessity of providing a basis for Ephesian officers and all Christians to resist the ‘fierce wolves’ (Acts 20:29) he knew would come to ravage the flock.

Quickly Paul reviewed his time with them: he had, at his own expense, lived in Ephesus and both publicly and privately testified ‘of repentance to God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ’ (Acts 20:21). He admonished the elders to gently tend the Christian community committed to their care. Paul warned that some of the coming false teachers and other disruptive influences would arise even from the group before him. He commended them to God. They prayed, wept, and parted.

Two phrases in Paul’s brief parting words (Acts 20:18-35) reveal much about his ministry to the church in Ephesus. He said ‘I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable,... teaching you...’ (vs. 20). Later he clarified this, ‘I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God’ (vs. 27).

Paul did not have the luxury of picking and choosing what in the Christian message might be popular or appealing, what might meet those needs of which his hearers were aware at that moment, or might be uplifting and thrilling. Paul knew, as he expressed in his letter which bears the name of the Ephesian church, that they were ‘not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, and against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in heavenly places’ (Eph 6:12).

Persons in such circumstances needed, not ‘sound bites’ of the gospel, but the whole thing. Now he could only remind them of the

full scope of his teaching, of ‘the whole counsel of God’, with the hope and confidence that this reminder would lead to remembrance and review; that they would be able to live consistent Christian lives founded on the totality of God’s revelation, and having done all, to stand. He commended the Ephesian elders to the grace of God. They wept and prayed together. They parted.

What was the content of that ‘whole counsel of God’? We can discern some of its details from the words of Paul recorded in Acts and in his epistles. His Ephesian letter gives hints of what he must have covered. It begins with reference to God’s determination and choice ‘before the foundation of the world’ (1:4). Human persons are ‘dead in trespasses and sin’ (2:1), but God’s grace and salvation through faith was revealed and made available through Jesus Christ; it is to result in ‘good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them’ (2:8-10). In Ephesians Paul insists that in Christ the barrier between Jews and Gentiles has been broken down (2:11–3:13). He calls his readers to know and love Christ, admonishes them ‘to lead a life worthy’ of their calling from God (4:1), ‘no longer as the heathen² do’ (4:17). He gives both general and specific instruction for so doing and for maintaining the relationships within the Christian community. Paul speaks of the officers of the church and its nature as the bride of Christ (5:23). He calls for Christians of all social, economic, and other levels to ‘Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ’ (5:21). All believers must be watchful and prepared because they live in a hostile environment and are engaged in a spiritual battle (6:10-18). In Ephesians Paul speaks also of the presence and work of the Holy Spirit, the present seal for the day of redemption (4:30) and the future promised inheritance (1:14). Hence, in this epistle ‘the whole counsel of God’ covers the person and work of God from eternity past into eternity future, from before creation to beyond the end of life, the world, and history as we now know them.

In short, ‘the whole counsel of God’ appears to contain an

²The RSV and many other modern translations say ‘no longer as the Gentiles do.’ The Greek word can be translated either ‘Gentiles’ or ‘heathen.’

overview of the main content and topics of information about God, his work, and his will. We should also assume that, as a part of ‘the whole counsel’, Paul and other Christian leaders built upon this foundation a superstructure containing far more than a ‘general survey’ of the things concerning God.

Contemporary Christians are in equal need of ‘the whole counsel of God’. But this book deals with only a part of the Christian Scriptures, the New Testament, which is only the last one third of the whole Bible. This leads to some important questions. Can we really seek the whole counsel of God by limiting ourselves only to themes of the New Testament? Certainly not! Then why should I write and you read this book? There are three parts to the answer. First, the New Testament is a part of the whole; I hope readers will seek an understanding of Old Testament themes as well, but an introduction to New Testament themes can be a good start. Second, although I cannot give a complete survey of the Old Testament, in dealing with New Testament themes we have to make frequent reference to the Old Testament; this book cannot ignore what precedes the New Testament in the Old. Third, the New Testament portrays the climax and the coming end of the drama of God’s revelation and work begun in the Old Testament. Here we find the major themes most fully developed and brought to their conclusion.³

Were this a formal work on New Testament theology there are numerous technical questions with which we would have to deal.

³There are some helpful books which seek to present New Testament themes by concentrating on their Old Testament phase and then their full development in the New Testament. Particularly helpful to me are two by my teacher and mentor, the late Professor F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Development of Old Testament Themes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968) and *The Time is Fulfilled: Five Aspects of the Fulfillment of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978). Another British scholar, C. H. Dodd, wrote an excellent little pamphlet on the subject, *The Old Testament in the New* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1952). Another brief, but fairly technical book on the subject by Professor Dodd is *According to the Scriptures: The Sub-Structure of New Testament Theology* (Digswell Place, England: James Nisbet and Co., 1952). I have not used this as my primary approach because I have little to add to what these men have already ably said.

Most of the details of such matters we must leave to others.⁴ We provide a brief description of three issues in the appendix to this introduction.

Nevertheless, the 'Introduction' is the place where a writer maps out his or her program and assumptions. Consequently, there are a number of items upon which we must touch to help orient the reader and help her or him to see from where this writer is coming.

Theology and Theologies

The word 'theology' scares a lot of people. It shouldn't because, coming from two words meaning 'God' and 'word', its definition is 'words about God' or simply 'teachings about God'. A more traditional explanation is that theology is the science (organized study) of God, the universe, and particularly human beings in it, and their relationship. Many contemporary scholars suggest other definitions; for example, that the primary concern of theology should be the quest for universal ethical principles or the individual's search for meaning or true selfhood. We'll use the traditional definition as a working hypothesis.

Theology as a field of study is divided into at least four subdivisions: *historical theology* – the study of what has been believed in the successive periods of the history of the church; *practical theology* – the investigation of both the theory and methods for practising, proclaiming, and teaching the faith; and *systematic* and *Biblical theology*. These last two require more explanation. The systematic theologian consciously and openly seeks some pattern for organizing material other than that found or implied in the Bible, such as one adapted from philosophy or the social sciences. The Biblical theologian seeks for one that in some way arises from the Scriptures and seeks to interpret it within its original historical-cultural setting. We will look briefly at the issue of 'Biblical Theology and

⁴Gerhard Hasel, *The New Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978); George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 20-28; and Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 21-74.

History' in the appendix to this introduction.

Some Biblical theologians like to claim they are avoiding forcing the Biblical data into an artificial outline or system. Nevertheless, we must acknowledge that to some extent any organization used will be one imported to the New Testament.

The Nature of the Bible and Its Message

These debates lead to the question of the nature of the Bible and how it presents its message. This is not the place to discuss the options and issues that surround this subject. Rather, we here state in general terms the assumptions upon which this book proceeds. The Bible is the inspired word of God. 'Inspiration,' when related to the Bible, is from the Greek word which means literally 'God-breathed.'⁵ This is in sharp contrast to the modern usage in which we may speak of an athlete or actor giving an 'inspired' performance or the 'inspiration' of an artist. In such instances 'inspiration' means the coming together of natural talent and training in a special circumstance which produces something beyond normal expectation; nevertheless, it is still a purely human activity. The inspiration of Scripture means that the message originates with God and he is active in its communication. But there is also a human dimension; the original writers were human beings. They used natural writing materials, human languages, and reflect the times and cultures of their own days and surroundings. Indeed their own personalities shine through the finished product.

How do the divine and human elements work together? They work together in a way far more intimate than would be involved if the writers were merely human typewriters or stenographers taking dictation. God selected the men⁶ whose backgrounds and personalities would express that which he desired; he 'breathed' (2 Tim 3:16) his message into them, and remained active in the writing process, superintended the project (2 Peter 1:21 says 'being carried by the Holy Spirit') to assure its authority and accuracy.

⁵*Theopneustos*, as in 2 Timothy 3:16, usually translated 'inspiration'; it might also be translated something like 'God-spirited.'

⁶Some manuscripts say 'holy men of God' (2 Pet 1:21).

But, it might be observed that the Bible does not look like a theology book, or, for the most part, even a book about morals and ethics. How does this ‘word about God’ come through in it? *The Bible is not so much concerned to reveal concepts, principles, and rules as to reveal a person, God.* It does so primarily by showing him at work and in relation to the universe and human beings. There are a couple of important assumptions at work: first, that God does what he does because of who he is; we come to know him by seeing him in action. Second, the moral and spiritual principles of the universe are simply reflections or extensions of God’s nature. A thing is true or false, good or bad, because of God’s attitude toward it. The person who desires to live pleasingly before God must first know him and then conform her/his will, attitudes, and actions to accord with the person of God. The Bible, then, is God’s record of his own presentation of himself and his works. But there is more. The Bible also shows varying human reactions to God and the consequences of those reactions. In addition it provides interpretations of God and his will; it shows how God’s will was applied and worked out in specific situations and circumstances.

But for at least two reasons this is more than simply an academic exercise. First, Christians are convinced that the activity of the Holy Spirit continues his work with the Scriptures as he guides the interpretation and application of them in succeeding generations of believers.⁷ Second, Biblical studies has a practical as well as a theoretical side. A major task of the contemporary interpreter is, in dependence upon the Holy Spirit, to identify those moral and spiritual principles inherent in the nature of God, which were applied to individuals and situations in the historical and cultural situation of Biblical times. Since the Bible’s words about God are for all times and places, the Biblical student must also seek to apply these same moral and spiritual principles, appropriately, to the situations of modern times, cultures, and places as well.

⁷Of course this does not mean that each and every interpretation of Scripture by one claiming the guidance of the Holy Spirit is automatically correct. Individuals and the Church must be aware of the proper ways for ‘handling accurately the word of truth’ (2 Tim 2:15, NASB).

The ultimate purpose of the Bible is to reveal God and to call humans into relationship with him. The careful study of the Bible involved in theology, Biblical history and other forms, misses its own mark if it does not bring one to know God better and into a proper relationship with him.

Organization and Structure

Traditional books on New Testament theology are usually organized along the lines of either the analytic or the thematic (synthetic) approach. The former investigates the various units (such as the Synoptic Gospels, the writings of John, those of Paul, and other divisions) to determine the teachings and emphases of each. Synthetic structure looks for common themes and the distinct way they are dealt with throughout the New Testament.

For this brief survey we will focus more upon the ‘whole counsel of God’ than its parts and the variety within its presentation in the New Testament. It seems to me that either consciously or subconsciously, there were in the minds of the New Testament writers a set of basic questions with which they dealt in one way or another. These questions arise naturally to many readers of the New Testament and the New Testament documents provide answers for them. The questions are:

- 1) Who is Jesus?
- 2) What Must I Do to be Saved?
- 3) How Should the Christian Live?
- 4) What is the Church?
- 5) What is the Church’s Relation to Society?
- 6) How Shall it End? and
- 7) What Does the New Testament Teach us About God?

The first two questions actually appear in the New Testament. The question of the identity of Jesus is raised in a number of settings. For example, after he calmed a storm the disciples ‘said to one another, “Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?”’ (Mark 4:41); in response to some claims by Jesus, the Jews queried, ‘Who do you claim to be?’ (John 8:53). On another occasion Jesus himself asked, ‘Who do you say that I am?’ (Mark 8:29). The

wording of our second question is that of the jailor of Philippi (Acts 16:31). The other questions are implied, inherent questions whose answers call for the types of things the writers seek to clarify for their readers. The answers for the questions may be expressed in different ways in different situations. However put, these answers comprise the basic message of the New Testament, the central New Testament themes, and the foundational elements of New Testament teaching.

Essentially by organizing the discussion around these questions we have adopted something of a thematic (synthetic) structure⁸ but have not followed that method consistently. Rather we have looked to the New Testament itself for help in determining structure. In dealing with some of the usually implied questions and answers the structure of our presentation shows concern for historical development and for the distinctive aspects of individual groupings of writings (an analytic approach). Our consideration of Jesus takes this form. Other theme-answers seem to be best presented within an outline which brings together the sum total of the relevant data from each of the various parts of the New Testament but with some attention to the identity and uniqueness of the particular parts from which the themes arise. Such themes as the Christian life and the church fit this pattern. The chapter on 'The End' shows a combination of both methods in which the focus is first upon the parts, then the whole picture. The 'word study method,' which identifies important terms and focuses on their shades of meaning and relation to similar

⁸The thematic or synthetic approach is less often used in studies of New Testament theology than the analytic structure. Donald Guthrie, in his massive study *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981), uses a more-or-less synthetic approach. George Ladd, whose organization is analytic, notes that A. M. Hunter 'expressed the desire that all future textbooks in New Testament theology be written from the synthetic rather than the analytic point of view' (George E. Ladd, *The Message of the New Testament* (1944), 121, cited by Ladd in *A Theology of the New Testament*, 28). See also I. Howard Marshall, *New Testament Theology. Many Witnesses, One Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004) and Frank Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament: A Canonical and Synthetic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

terms, has been both much used and maligned by others. It has its place and is evident throughout our study.

The first chapter introduces 'auxiliary' areas of New Testament studies which, I hope, will be particularly influential. It mentions some of the essential features of the world and cultures in which the New Testament writers and their readers lived. Much of the content of the New Testament is shaped to address meaningfully the issues and needs of that particular time and those societies. New Testament studies, I am convinced, must pay careful attention to the issues of the original setting of the New Testament for they are the setting for the piece of literature we are studying.⁹ It is only as we familiarize ourselves with their world that we may learn the basic principles, the theological truths, upon which the writers operated. We may then seek to apply those same truths to the different conditions in our world. In short, we must ask what these Biblical teachings meant to them, the original recipients, before asking what they mean to and for us.

There are yet two other features of organization which I must explain. Why I have chosen to deal with the New Testament's teachings about God last rather than first. The New Testament writers begin by assuming the existence of God and of some knowledge of him on the basis of Old Testament revelation. The distinctive elements in their presentation of God are contained in and permeate their writings as a whole. There is a sense that as we look at each of the New Testament themes we are also seeing at least their implied contribution to the whole of the New Testament's portrayal of God. Hence, it seems appropriate to let our focus upon God serve as the grand climax of what we say about his self-revelation and work in the successive parts of the New Testament teachings which we summarize.

Secondly, why does the table of contents show no study of the Holy Spirit? Some will argue for the need for specific attention upon

⁹It is not a coincidence that the initial draft of this study was made immediately after I completed *Customs and Controversies: Intertestamental Jewish Backgrounds of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995). In the second and subsequent printings (2000 ff), the title of the book changed to *Jewish Backgrounds of the New Testament*.



the person and work of the Holy Spirit in our time. I agree but have attempted to deal with Him in a way similar to that in which He is presented in Scripture itself. The Holy Spirit is the one person of the Godhead whose work is not to call attention to Himself. Jesus said of the Spirit, 'He will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you' (John 16:13-15). For this reason I have dealt with the specific parts of the work of the Holy Spirit and his nature in appropriate chapters. Thus we see his work in salvation, in the Christian life, in the church, and in our discussion of God.

Some will raise eyebrows at my failure to make more use of contemporary critical methodologies and tools. At times the influence of these will be detected in my background. There is, of course, much help and many insights that could be derived from a more obvious and consistent use of them. There are also dangers and even those most devoted to critical methodologies and studies are frequently in disagreement about much associated with their practice and conclusions. Keeping in mind the audience I envision, I have chosen to focus primarily upon the surface meaning of the text.

Greek, but Not All

Greek was the language in which the New Testament was written. The derogatory phrase, 'It's all Greek to me,' has scared many away from anything that even uses the name of the feared language. It doesn't need to be that way. Even if New Testament Greek is an unfamiliar world to you, please don't be intimidated. I'll try to help you.

As is true in all languages, Greek carries some fine points of meaning that are difficult if not impossible to translate into other languages. It does not seem unreasonable to assume that 'intermediate-level' Bible students could be open to exploration of some fine points of meaning which can be conveyed only with reference to the language in which the New Testament was originally written. And so I will occasionally refer to Greek to clarify more precisely what the writer intended (our use of Greek may also

encourage some readers to seek to learn more of the language). When I must use a Greek word I will transliterate it into English letters, and indicate its meaning. I will try to explain simply the implications of Greek grammatical constructions to which I refer.

Let's now mention two or three of the more important features of the Greek language that differ from English. English verb tenses primarily indicate time – past, present, or future. In the Greek tenses time, if present at all, is of only secondary significance. Greek verb tenses primarily denote the kind of action the writer has in mind. Some tenses indicate action that is continuing, going on as he or she writes or speaks. Some tenses envision action which was in process, reached its conclusion, and now its results continue. Finally, one Greek tense, the aorist, views action as a whole; the action may occur over a long period of time, but the writer or speaker views it at a glance, in its entirety.

Another feature of Greek is that the construction of a conditional sentence indicates the degree of certainty with which the writer or speaker expects the condition to be fulfilled. Also, questions may be asked in a way that shows whether a positive or negative answer is expected.

One more note about Greek. The Greek word usually translated *Christ* means *anointed*. In the ancient Hebrew world a leader (priest, king, or prophet) was inducted or inaugurated into office by being anointed. Usually this meant that in the proper ceremonial setting oil was poured on the person's head. In some cases one was *anointed* by the Spirit of the Lord (The Holy Spirit) coming upon him. In either case after being anointed the individual was an *anointed one*, a recognized leader. In the Hebrew language the word for *anoint* is the one from which comes the word *Messiah*.

In the world of the Greek New Testament *Christos* usually meant *Messiah*, a title, in those parts where the Jewish influence is strong. In parts written to or about the Gentile world *Christos* was usually a proper name, Christ, Jesus Christ, or Christ Jesus. The context of the passage helps determine whether *Christos* should be translated *Messiah* or *Christ*. When a definite article appears before the word it should usually be translated *the Messiah*. *The Christ* probably



means *the Messiah*. Some of the newer translations, such as the *New Revised Standard Version* and *Today's New International Version*, frequently, but not always, translate *the Christ* as *the Messiah*.

In the New Testament world *the Messiah* was understood in a number of different ways. The title always referred to *The Greatest Leader*. Most often it was thought to refer to the coming great king from David's family, the one who would bring the Hebrew nation back to her position of power, wealth, and prominence. There were numerous other ideas about the person and work of Messiah. In his teachings Jesus sought to correct and redefine the meaning of the title and to present himself as *The Messiah*, as he understood the title.

There are other distinctive features of the Greek language that are helpful to know as we study the New Testament. Hence, I'll introduce other features as needed.

A Personal Word Before We Continue

As I come to the close of this work (writers usually write introductions last – we're an odd lot!) I must state some personal goals and intentions and confess some failures. First, as does every writer, I have come to this study with a complex set of experiences, commitments, opinions, and predispositions. I have done my best to set these aside and let the New Testament text speak its own message. Of course I have failed; no one can erase all that has gone before. But I have tried. Some who have known me may be tempted to say, 'Oh, I didn't know he thought that!' There's a good chance I didn't before I began this work. I hope and pray that I will continue to grow and to change when the better understandings of the text through the guidance of the Spirit so indicate.

Second, I openly acknowledge again that I have not presented 'the whole counsel of God', even all of that part contained in the New Testament. My aim and objectives are limited in scope; there are areas and issues I have omitted. I have striven for simplicity and brevity. I have sought to provide an introduction to the second step of Biblical study, that toward attaining understanding of the entirety

of God's counsel. Hopefully this effort will both assist and lead to continuing understanding and growth.

As I look back over these pages I am reminded of the words of A. M. Hunter in the preface to one of his books.

I have no hope of pleasing the pundits who will give my little book a superior smile and reach for Bultmann or Stauffer. But it may help the hard-working parson who wants to keep up to date theologically, and the theological student in our church colleges may value a short and simple Introduction to a very big subject. Is not this one of the things that Divinity professors like myself are for?¹⁰

I have no desire or even thought of replacing Professor Hunter's 'little book'. It is my hope and prayer that mine may some day, somewhere, give the kind of help to a pilgrim in progress as his gave to me.

Third, I realize I have written as a labour of both conviction and love. I am convinced, primarily by my own experience, that today's Christians desperately need much greater awareness of 'the whole counsel of God'. Too often, even those who have been in the faith for many years have only bits and pieces. We all need the whole counsel, the whole platform of Christianity, to serve as a firm foundation upon which to meet the challenges of daily life and the onslaughts of the enemy.

The writing of this book has been a labour of love. Love, first of all, for Jesus Christ, the subject of the New Testament, love and gratitude for salvation by grace which God made available through him, love for the life into which Christians have been called, love for the church, and love for God's word. I do not claim neutrality. This book is by a committed Christian primarily for other Christians and those who want to know more about the New Testament.

Finally, anyone speaking or writing from such a stance as mine, recognizing human limitations and frailties, cannot help but ask her

¹⁰A. M. Hunter, *Introducing New Testament Theology* (London: SCM, 1957), 8.



or himself, 'Have I got it right? Am I presenting the truth?' I have done my best to do so. Where I have not, I pray that God will prevent damage. I pray that through this brief survey of 'the whole counsel of God' as revealed in the New Testament, unbelievers will be confronted with Jesus who loves them, my fellow believers will be informed and strengthened, and, above all, that God will be glorified.

Added Notes: Some Related Introductory Issues

Technical Biblical theologians confront a number of important issues. One category of such asks about matters related to the author, the audience, place and time of writing, sources of information, literary forms, purpose, point of view, and similar concerns of each literary unit under consideration. A second asks such questions as: Is it possible to write a theology of the New Testament? Is there sufficient information? Are New Testament teachings primarily characterized by unity or diversity? Are they authoritative and normative for all times and places or do they merely describe the beliefs of certain peoples in particular times and places?

Finally, there are at least three matters which have to do more with one's presuppositions and basic assumptions. These include (1) Biblical Theology and History, (2) Ideas about the Nature of Religion, and (3) Supernaturalism and Naturalism. These lie more properly within the realm of studies with more philosophical-theological orientations than Biblical studies but they have significant impact upon such studies. What follows is a very brief introduction to these three.

Biblical Theology and History

History is very important to the Biblical theologian. There is, however, disagreement about the nature of history in general and about what Biblical history relates. Some theologians may assume that it reports the actual events, thoughts, people, and institutions of the time and place of which the author writes. Others believe that some history, Biblical history in particular, is really a presentation of the situations, conditions, and concerns of the writer and his audience in their own

setting. Thus, it is suggested, the writer used his account of the past as a framework within which to relate and wrestle with the issues of his own day or to present his own ideas. This record may or may not accurately relate what actually happened. The author, these students believe, selected, organized, and emphasized the purported record of the past to reflect his own day; the author even may have invented persons, events, statements, and situations. All this is of little consequence because the purpose of history, according to this perspective, is not to describe that which was in the writer's past but in the present. Finally, history may be looked upon as having virtually no concern for past events, institutions, ideas, and the like, but rather with the experiences of the writer and those about him through which he came into experiences of meaningful existence or true being, authentic selfhood. This view, stimulated by contemporary relativistic philosophical outlooks, denies that any truth can be absolute and eternal;¹¹ it assumes only that history has relevance which has value for the individual in the present.

These differences of opinion about Biblical history affect the assumptions and methodologies used in studying it. Some, usually the more 'liberal' in their orientations, argue that the Bible is 'just another human book' which must be studied with the same assumptions and tools used in the investigation of any other book. More traditional Biblical students argue that the presence of the divine activity in the production, nature, and message of the Bible require that it be handled in special ways.

These debates are closely related to the two differing sets of presuppositions which underlie the conflicts between Biblical and theological scholars. To these we must now turn.

Ideas About the Nature of Religion

There are at least three major differences of opinions about the nature of religion itself, especially of Christianity. The traditional view assumes that Christianity *primarily* involves God's actions and

¹¹One such example is Existentialism which asserts that each person must find what is true and worthwhile for him or herself at a particular time and place and thereby become an authentic individual.

human response. Human sin brought separation from God, guilt, and affected adversely the essential make-up or nature of persons and their environment, leaving them helpless. Therefore God, out of love for his created beings, took the initiative and provided the way of salvation through Jesus Christ, making possible forgiveness from sin, a new nature, and a right relationship and fellowship with himself. Humans are to respond by accepting this provision by faith.

The so-called 'old Liberal' (or 'Modernist') view held that Christianity *primarily* involves human efforts for self-improvement or development. All people are basically good but need to extend further and use the moral and spiritual faculties already present to enable them to attain complete God-likeness. The Bible provides the principles, ideals, guidelines, and examples humans needed to improve themselves. Much contemporary non-evangelical Christianity, as that exemplified above in our reference to Bultmann (1884-1974), believed religion primarily involves human attainment of existential self-awareness, of true selfhood. He said Christianity is the 'conceptual presentation of man's existence as an existence determined by God.'¹² Scripture affirms the possibility of experiences of authentic being, tells of others who have sought and found it, and calls us to the type of freedom, decision, and experiences which lead to it.

Postmodernism

By the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries a new outlook, *Postmodernism*, had supplanted Existentialism as the philosophical *mode-of-the-day* in many circles. Its newness and widespread influence requires a bit more explanation than the description given previous *schools of thought*.

Postmodernism is committed to absolute relativism and so rejects any notion of objective or universal truth. Furthermore, it operates with a pluralism that entertains the possibility that many "truths" may be correct, even if they are contradictory. As might be expected,

¹²R. Bultmann (1925), 'The Problem of Theological Exegesis of the New Testament,' reprinted in *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, James M. Robinson, ed., (Richmond, VA: Knox, 1968), 236-37.

such an approach is hard to define or describe. It can affect virtually all academic areas. Although suspicious of it, some liberal or conservative theological groups¹³ are attracted¹⁴ to parts of Postmodernism.

At first glance it is evident that Postmodernism differs from Existentialism in that it focuses upon the community rather than the individual for responses to significant questions and issues. Often it looks to the process of developing interpersonal relations between diverse members of a group for significant guidance in confronting concerns.¹⁵

There is no specific Postmodern view of the Bible or statement of theology. Christianity is *one* of many paradigms of the human-divine relationship. Biblical authority is usually viewed as relative at best. It is one of the sources for opinions brought to the discussion. The Bible must be interpreted like any other document (with approaches such as structuralism and deconstructionism). Postmodernism lays special concern for the protection of the rights of the disadvantaged and oppressed of society. It acknowledges no ultimate (absolute) moral or ethical standards.

Supernaturalism and Naturalism

Closely related to disagreements about the nature of history, which we previously noted, are those regarding the existence and nature of God (or gods), spiritual beings, and the possibility of supernatural occurrences within human experience. Until about the eighteenth century there was general agreement that divine or spiritual beings or forces could and did intervene in history. Since then, with the

¹³Cf. Millard J. Erickson, *Postmodernizing the Faith. Evangelical Responses to the Challenge of Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998).

¹⁴Steven Connor, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism* (Cambridge/New York, The Cambridge University Press, 2004).

¹⁵The 2006 General Assembly of the APresbyterian Church in the United States of America@ adopted an amended report on APeace, Unity, and Purity of the Church.@ The initial pages describe the process used by the Task Force which drew up the report. It illustrates how a group with different backgrounds and views might work within a Postmodern framework.

birth of the intellectual movement called ‘The Enlightenment’, has come an increase in the notion that whatever occurs does so on the basis of natural forces inherent within the universe – that supernatural occurrences cannot and do not happen. Thus, those holding anti-supernaturalistic or naturalistic presuppositions assume that divine revelation, miracles, resurrections, divine judgments, supernatural conversions, and the end of history and the world are impossible and are outdated ways of thinking. Religion is rather to be understood and described as a perfectly natural part of the experience of some societies and individuals; it conforms to the same patterns of origin, development, and change present in other intellectual, philosophical, sociological, psychological, or artistic phenomena. It is to be studied ‘scientifically,’ that is objectively, with human reason and scientific methods, and without assuming or admitting the possibility of supernatural occurrences.

What does all this mean in the study of Biblical theology? Liberal scholars assume that Biblical history is simply the record of natural, human experiences. The claims that divine revelations and miracles happened are to be disregarded or explained in modern, scientific terms which show them to be natural occurrences. Once shorn of these, the Biblical record may be studied as descriptions of the teachings and actions of great religious thinkers of the past, persons whose concerns for moral goodness, justice, and love should be a pattern for all generations. Some believed the New Testament describes religion as the human spirit becoming conscious of itself through dialectical conflicts¹⁶ or as a pure spiritual-ethical phenomenon which resulted from the influence of religious personality and its development within the Christian community.¹⁷ The ‘History of Religions School’¹⁸ suggested that Christianity grew naturalistically, following an evolutionary pattern, in which later forms of religious thought and life developed (by borrowing and adaptation) from those

¹⁶E.g., F. C. Baur (1792–1860).

¹⁷E.g., Albrecht Ritschl (1822–1889) and Adolf Harnack (1851–1930).

¹⁸E.g., Richard Reitzenstein (1861–1931), Wilhelm Bousset (1865–1920), and Wilhelm Wrede (1859–1906).



of earlier periods or from other contemporary religions. For this group Biblical theology is concerned solely to describe religion within its environment at particular points in its history.

In the twentieth century existential outlooks deprecate history in an objective sense. Rudolf Bultmann and his followers regard the New Testament as a record of the early church's attainment of selfhood through Jesus. This record is in imprecise, unscientific language which includes interpreted (even 'created') history in the literary form 'myth,' the language and forms which were borrowed from Jewish apocalyptic literature and Gnosticism. The real goal of Christianity is the search for personal meaningfulness, self-identity, authentic being of the sort experienced by the early Christians. This can be accomplished only by cutting through the mythological form of the Biblical language ('demythologizing') to encounter the writers' experiences of personhood.

