

## AN INTRODUCTION TO NT THEOLOGY

### Introduction

In his book *Greek Passion*, Niko Kazantzakis includes a parable that may give us a starting point for our discussion on the theological enterprise.

Once upon a time there was a little village in the desert. All inhabitants of this village were blind. One day a great king with his army passed by. He was riding a huge elephant. The blind had heard many stories about elephants, and they desired to approach the king and touch and investigate his elephant in order to get an idea of what elephants are like. Some of them . . . stepped forward, bowed before the king and asked for permission to touch his elephant. The first blind man grasped his trunk, another one his leg and foot, and a third fellow his flank. One man stretched far and seized his ear, and still another was allowed to ride on the back of the elephant. Delighted they returned to their village. The fellow blind encircled them and eagerly asked them what kind of being the monstrous animal elephant is. The first one said: "It is an immense hose, and woe to him who will be grabbed by it." The second one responded: "It is a pillar clothed with skin and hair." The third said: "It is like a rampart having also skin and hair." The man, who had seized the ear, replied: "It is not a wall at all but a very thick carpet which moves as soon as one touches it." And the last one declared: "This is all nonsense. It is a huge mountain which moves." The four friends laughed. "We are the blind," said Giannakos. "You are right, forgive me. We wander around His small toe and exclaim: 'God is as hard as a rock' Why? Because we do not get further."<sup>1</sup>

This parable gives us some insights in the process of doing theology. It also has limitations as any example has, and we should not stretch it too far. In any case, there are people who are interested in knowing more about God, His character, and His work. They have heard about the divine being, have reflected upon God, and have already drawn some conclusions. They are involved in theological thinking. As soon as they have the chance to gain more knowledge they use the opportunity. They investigate the "elephant" and share their observations with others.

Which insights does this parable provide?

- (1) Knowledge about God starts with *revelation*. God has taken and takes the initiative in revealing Himself as well as truths about Himself and about the plan of salvation. He "passes by" where we are.
- (2) In order to gain knowledge about God and enter into a relationship with Him it is *necessary*

---

<sup>1</sup>Niko Kazantzakis, *Griechische Passion* (Berlin: Verlag Volk und Welt, 1968), 193-194 (translated).

- to be engaged in the theological enterprise, that is, to look at and study what God has revealed. Theological thinking is not a plight but a privilege and a joy.
- (3) Thinking theologically means to look at the evidence and *draw conclusions*. The conclusions may be correct or wrong, partially correct, too narrow or too broad. Therefore, a certain tentativeness of one's own evaluations must be maintained.
  - (4) Doing theology requires *humility*. Humans are not infallible, neither are we. The preamble of the Seventh-day Adventist 27 Fundamental Beliefs emphasizes: "Revision of these statements may be expected at a General Conference session when the church is led by the Holy Spirit to a fuller understanding of Bible truth or finds better language in which to express the teachings of God's Holy Word."<sup>2</sup>
  - (5) Theological thinking is an *ongoing process* which may lead us to an ever deeper understanding and greater appreciation of God and salvation. This process is never finished and will continue throughout eternity.
  - (6) Theology thinking is *not done alone* and in isolation. It is an activity of a group, namely Christ's church, and of individuals in the context of and in exchange with the church.
  - (7) Ideally all believers are involved in the process of doing theology. Although the church has employed specialists, who have been trained in theology, *everyone participates*, and the perspectives of all participants are needed.
  - (8) The nature of the subject being studied does not allow for a fully comprehensible and exhaustive understanding. Yet, what can be known is *true, even if it is not the whole picture*. The bits and piece are sufficient to establish a meaningful relationship to God and to be saved.
  - (9) Different investigators will almost automatically come up with different perspectives. If they start with the same presuppositions and use a common approach, their observations are usually *complementary* instead of contradictory.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup>*Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, revised 2000, 16<sup>th</sup> ed. (Hagerstown: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2000), 9.

<sup>3</sup>Doing theology with the presupposition that God is a living being or the presupposition that God is only a word for a beneficial encounter between human beings will, for instance, will lead to totally different results.

(10) Since theological thinking wrestles with that which transcends our three-dimensional world we have to count on emerging *paradoxes*.<sup>4</sup>

These are helpful insights, but we need to proceed in a more organized manner and raise some other questions.

## I. Defining Theology

### 1. What is Theology?

The term “theology” is not found in Scripture, but the concept is certainly present. Other terms such as “Trinity” are not found either, and yet the Bible teaches that God is triune. The term *theologia* was used in classical Greek. The literal meaning would be “an account of or discourse about gods or God,”<sup>5</sup> “talk about God,”<sup>6</sup> and therefore also “the doctrine on God.”<sup>7</sup> Momentarily, we are not concerned with non-Christian theologies and therefore limit ourselves to the Christian use of the term “theology.”

This word has an extremely wide range of meanings. In *A New Handbook of Christian Theology* the entry “theology” tells us: “See Biblical Theology, Black Theology, Confessional Theology, Death of God Theology, Dogmatic Theology, Empirical Theology, Feminist Theology, Historical Theology, Liberation Theology, Narrative Theology, Natural Theology, Philosophical Theology, Political Theology, Postmodern Theology, Practical Theology, Process Theology, Sacraments/Sacramental Theology, Systematic Theology, Theological Method, Womanist Theology.”<sup>8</sup> This list is far from being comprehensive, and unfortunately definitions on some of the above mentioned theologies vary somewhat. Whereas some theologians equate, for instance,

---

<sup>4</sup>However, even in our world we encounter what could be called paradoxes, for example, when light seems to be waves but also particles.

<sup>5</sup>D. F. Wright, “Theology,” in *New Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright, eds., (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 680.

<sup>6</sup>T. Gilby, “Theology,” in *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Religion*, 3 vols., edited by Paul Kevin Meagher, Thomas C. O’Brien, and Consuelo Maria Aherne, (Washington: Corpus Publications, 1979), 3:3497.

<sup>7</sup>So used by Athanasius and Augustine; cf. Wright, 680.

<sup>8</sup>Donald W. Musser and Joseph L. Price, eds., *A New Handbook of Christian Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 486-487.

dogmatic theology and systematic theology, others do not.

Originally “theology” referred to the doctrine of God in its narrow sense. During the medieval ages theology was understood as a field of studies and was regarded as a science, even the queen of all sciences.<sup>9</sup> The claim to be a science is still held today. Therefore, it is argued that the equation of science with natural science only is too narrow.<sup>10</sup> Today theology is often used in the broad sense encompassing “all the disciplines involved in a university course or in training for church ministry.”<sup>11</sup>

If we move from the broadest usage to the most restricted one the following picture emerges. First level: *Theological studies*. They comprise (1) *biblical studies*, (2) *historical studies*, (3) *practical studies*, and (4) *doctrinal studies*. Basically theological studies encompass the courses that we offer for a Master of Divinity degree. This is the broadest sense of “theology” in a Christian context. Each of the four subcategories can be further developed. Biblical studies include studies of biblical books and themes and studies of biblical languages. Historical studies include studies of the history of the Ancient Near East, the history of the Greco-Roman Empire, church history, and the study of archeology. Practical studies include studies in homiletics, Christian counseling, church administration, church growth, evangelism, and mission. Doctrinal studies will be pursued on the next level.

Second level: *Doctrinal studies*. They can be subdivided into (1) *biblical theology*, (2) *historical theology*, (3) *systematic theology*, and (4) *philosophical theology*. Here we have to pause for a moment and explain these different terms.

---

<sup>9</sup>On theology as science and the scientific method applied to theology see, e.g., Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1998), 35-37; and T. C. O’Brien, “Theology as Science” in *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Religion*, edited by Paul Kevin Meagher, Thomas C. O’Brien, and Consuelo Maria Aherne, (Washington: Corpus Publications, 1979), 3:3503-3504.

<sup>10</sup>Erickson, 36-37. D. S. Adam, “Theology,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. by James Hastings (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1980), 293, states: “Theology may be briefly defined as the science which deals, according to the scientific method, with the facts and phenomena of religion and culminates in a comprehensive synthesis or philosophy of religion, which seeks to set forth in a systematic way all that can be known regarding the objective grounds of religious belief. . . . Theology is the science which, by right use of reason, in accordance with proper scientific method, correlates, systematizes, and organizes the matter of human religious experiences in such a way as to reach a unified body of coherent doctrine, fitted to satisfy the mind’s demand for truth and to furnish guidance for the practical life.”

<sup>11</sup>Wright, 680.

“Biblical theology in its simplest form is the effort to state what is the theology of the Bible or the theology found within the Bible.”<sup>12</sup> It starts with the theology of a biblical book or author, e.g., the theology of Mark. Which theological emphases can be found in his gospel? How are they developed? What did the author want to express? From the theologies of individual biblical books students of Scripture move toward a theology of the OT and a theology of the NT respectively and finally toward a biblical theology. Biblical theology stays strictly with the biblical text and does not raise issues that are of importance today but are not directly addressed in the Bible.

Historical theology is the study of how certain doctrines were understood during church history. “If New Testament theology is the systematic theology of the first century, then historical theology studies the systematic theologies held and taught by various theologians throughout the history of the church.”<sup>13</sup>

Wayne Grudem explains philosophical theology as “studying theological topics largely without use of the Bible, but using the tools and methods of philosophical reasoning and what can be known about God from observing the universe.”<sup>14</sup> Some suggest that philosophy can “supply content for theology” whereas others suggest that it can “defend theology or establish its truth” or that it can “scrutinize its concepts and arguments.”<sup>15</sup>

Systematic theology has been defined as “any study that answers the question, ‘What does the whole Bible teach us today?’ about any given subject. This definition indicates that systematic theology involves collecting and understanding all the relevant passages in the Bible on various topics and then summarizing their teachings clearly so that we know what to believe about each topic.”<sup>16</sup> Oftentimes there is a close relation between biblical theology and systematic theology.

---

<sup>12</sup>Patrick D. Miller, *Biblical Theology*,” in Donald W. Musser and Joseph L. Price, eds., *A New Handbook of Christian Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 63.

<sup>13</sup>Erickson, 27.

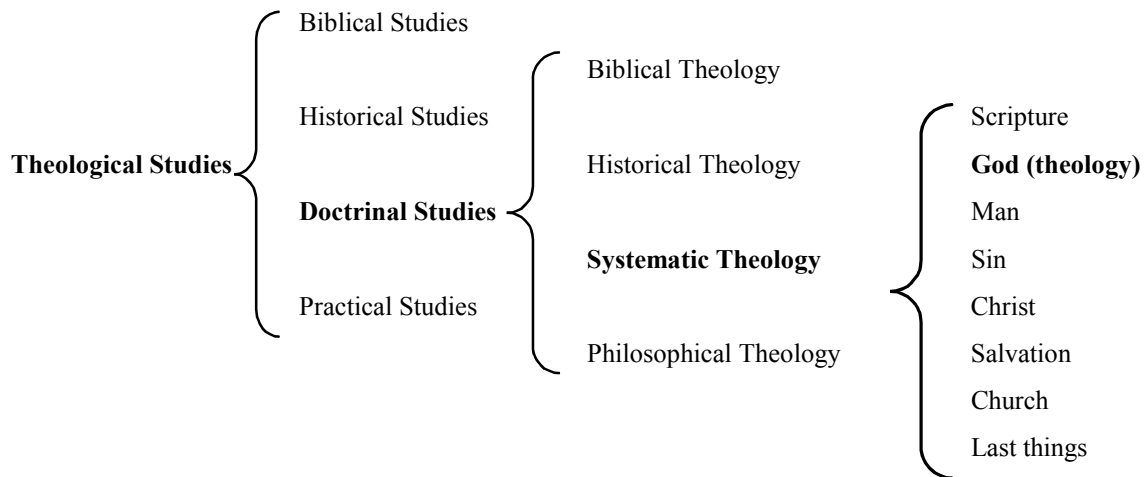
<sup>14</sup>Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 21.

<sup>15</sup>Erickson, 29.

<sup>16</sup>Grudem, 21. Leonard J. Biallas, “Dogmatic Theology,” in *A New Handbook of Christian Theology*, edited by Donald W. Musser and Joseph L. Price (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 127-130, distinguishes between dogmatic theology and systematic theology, although oftentimes they are equated, and he argues that systematic theology “uses

Sometimes an overlap occurs. Ideally systematic theology builds on biblical theology. Its emphasis is on today. Therefore systematic theology does not only discuss all major topics of the Bible, but also addresses contemporary issues that are not directly, yet through principles spelled out in Scripture.<sup>17</sup> Many theologies such as liberation theology, process theology, and death of God theology can be regarded as parts or segments of systematic theology. Difference in emphases and results are due to the presuppositions and methods of biblical interpretation used by the respective theologians.

We now turn to the third level of meaning of the term “theology” which gets even narrower: For example, systematic theology can be subdivided in a number of biblical and Christian doctrines, one of them is the doctrine of God, which we call theology in the narrowest sense.



The chart is derived from Millard Erickson pointing to the various senses of theology.<sup>18</sup> In this paper we will focus on NT theology which is a part of biblical theology.

---

insights and tools from culture” (128).

<sup>17</sup>E.g., how should we relate to psychology, sociology, or the natural sciences? Which choices should we make in the field of music? What about AIDS, abortion, genetic manipulation, chemical dependence, cloning, of humans, pornography, euthanasia, etc.?

<sup>18</sup>Erickson, 29.

## II. The History of NT Theology

The history of NT theology is extensively described by Gerhard Hasel.<sup>19</sup> We advise the reader to refer to this volume. To some extent Dan O. Via also deals with it.<sup>20</sup> NT theology came as a separate study of Scripture developed relatively late. This was due to the fact that doctrines were emphasized and the content of Scripture was regarded synonymous or identical with the dogma of the church. However, in 1745 biblical theology was separated from dogmatics and 1787 “marks the beginning of Biblical theology’s role as a purely historical discipline, completely independent from dogmatics . . .”<sup>21</sup>

From then on hermeneutical considerations determine the nature of biblical theology. Biblical exegesis as well as biblical theology and systematic theology work with certain presuppositions. It is not possible to start with a “tabula rasa.” We always come to the Biblical texts with certain impressions and decisions made earlier which will influence our research. It will make a difference whether we accept divine revelation and miracle or whether we reject them. NT theology was and still is dominated by scholars who employ the historical-critical method.<sup>22</sup> Yet, there are also those who do not reject revelation and inspiration and accept the self-testimony of Scripture. In our days literary criticism, existential interpretation, reader-response criticism, social-scientific criticism and other approaches shape NT theology in addition to historic criticism. These approaches oftentimes work with the same or similar presuppositions that are characteristic for a historical-critical approach.

## III. NT Theology and Its Relation to Hermeneutics, Exegesis, and Systematic Theology

If biblical theology is the effort to state what is the theology of the Bible, how does it relate to hermeneutics, exegesis, and systematic theology? We have already partially answered this

---

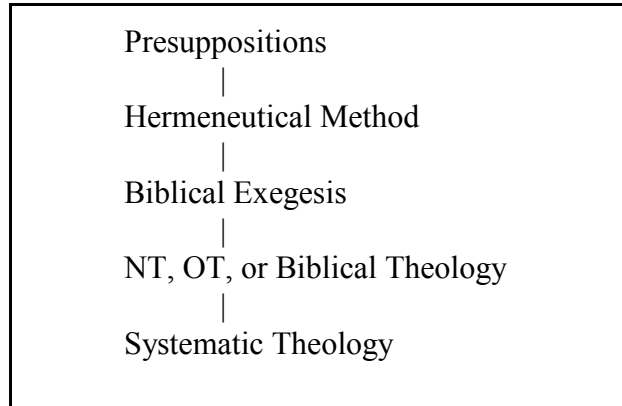
<sup>19</sup>Gerhard Hasel, *New Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978)

<sup>20</sup>Dan O. Via, *What is New Testament Theology*, Guides to Biblical Scholarship New Testament Series (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

<sup>21</sup>Hasel, 22.

<sup>22</sup>It is claimed—Via, 107—that “The New Testament itself disqualifies any theology that is not historical-critical.”

question but need to elaborate on it. Biblical theology is not done in a vacuum nor is it the first step in the theological enterprise. NT theology is dependent on a methodology not only for doing the type of work it attempts to do but on a methodology which undergirds all theological approaches to Scripture. The following chart points out the relationship between hermeneutics, exegesis, and theology. Although there is a certain progression from presuppositions to systematic theological, there are also reciprocal relations.



All of us start with certain presuppositions. Depending on these presuppositions we choose a method of interpretation. Those who take the biblical text more or less at face value will use an approach different from the one that people choose who question the validity and authority of Scripture. Whereas some favor the historical-biblical or historical-grammatical method, others employ the historical-critical method. Such a method will heavily influence the exegesis of Biblical passages and the subsequent NT, OT or biblical theology.

NT theology is not only shaped by presuppositions and a hermeneutical method, it should rest on sound exegesis. Exegesis is a prerequisite which has to precede the formulation of theological themes. In case exegesis is neglected biblical theology does not have a sound foundation. Whoever studies Scripture will encounter the phenomenon that in some cases a first impression may be wrong. We take a look at a text or passage and suppose that we understand its meaning and message. However, by taking a closer look we notice that our understanding of the text was misguided. We have to make corrections. The person who does not wrestle with the exegesis of biblical passages but starts to formulate a theology may be compared to the man who built his house on sand. On the other hand biblical theology also influences the interpretation of various biblical passages.

Biblical theology and systematic theology are not the same, but there is a certain overlap. Biblical theology attempts to uncover the theology of biblical authors, of the OT, the NT, and the entire canon, although what it finds out has also normative value for today. There is a historical element in addition to the theological element. Furthermore, biblical theology does not deal with questions raised today which are not directly addressed in Scripture. Here we need systematic theology. Systematic theology answers to the question what the Bible teaches us today. It finds biblical principles which help us to deal with new challenges not explicitly mentioned in Scripture, e.g., abortion, current philosophical and political ideas, gene technology, health issues, ecumenical agendas, and others. Systematic theology overlaps with biblical theology in so far that both try to collect and understand all biblical data on a given subject. Systematic theology summarizes them in such a way that we clearly understand God's will and are enabled to act upon our understanding. However, this does not mean that biblical theology is only descriptive and cannot be normative. In any case, although there may be quite some overlap with biblical theology, ideally systematic theology is informed by biblical theology and builds upon it.

#### **IV. Problems and Questions for a NT Theology**

A number of questions and problems need to be addressed and decisions have to be made which are connected with formulating a NT theology.

- (1) *NT Theology or NT Theologies?* Probably, no scholar will deny that in the NT writings we find different theological emphases. Pauline theology is somewhat different from Matthean theology, and Luke contains theological emphases different from John. Paul and James are quite different. The questions are: How do we evaluate these differences? Are different theological emphases contradictory and do they exclude each other or are they complementary? In case they are not complimentary, it will be impossible to come up with a NT theology. We will end up with many different theologies and a NT theology is inconceivable. Indeed, a great number of scholars suggest that it is impossible to arrive at a biblical theology or even at an OT theology or NT theology. Influenced by their presuppositions and the use of the historical-critical method they claim that the different theologies of biblical authors or the theologies of the sources behind the written documents

are so different that they cannot be reconciled and subsumed under a common biblical theology. However, whereas some scholars would support the thesis that the differences are unsurmountable and would resort to a limited NT theology excluding some biblical authors from being treated,<sup>23</sup> others would argue that a NT theology can be formulated in spite of different emphases of the NT authors.<sup>24</sup>

- (2) *A Unifying Theme?* Closely related to the first question is the issue whether or not there is a unifying theme in the NT or—expressed differently—whether or not there is a center of the NT which provides unity in diversity. Various centers of the NT have been suggested such as anthropology, salvation history, covenant, love, Christology, the justification of the godless, the theology of the cross, etc.<sup>25</sup> The problem with these centers is that they may hinder scholars to deal with certain biblical data because these data may not fit the suggested centers. Consequently they may be left them out. Sometimes even some NT writings are pushed into the background because they do not fit the preconceived center.

Via writes: “It is Hasel’s opinion that no one structuring principle is deep and wide enough to grasp the theology of the New Testament. Nevertheless, it is the ultimate objective of New Testament theology to draw out of concealment the unity that can bind together divergent testimonies of the New Testament books (163-64, 218.)”<sup>26</sup> Hasel distinguishes between “(1) The question of the center and unity of the NT itself, i.e., the issue as to whether there is something that appears as the undergirding aspect on the basis of which unity can be discerned in spite of all diversity, and (2) the question of the center *as an organizing principle* for NT theology on the one hand and as a criterion for ‘content criticism’ which

---

<sup>23</sup>According to Via, 8, for R. Bultmann “Paul and John are his canon within the canon.” Cf., Hasel, 142-143.

<sup>24</sup>Via, 11, states: “At one point Dunn acknowledges that some of the diversities constitute incompatibilities (26), but in the 1989 Foreword he does not allow that these incompatibilities amount to contradictions.” Peter Balla, mentioned in Via, 14, holds in Via’s words: “While there are differences among the writers, these do not amount to contradictions . . .”

<sup>25</sup>Cf. Hasel, 144-164.

<sup>26</sup>Via, 13.

affirms in one form or another a ‘canon within the canon.’”<sup>27</sup> Therefore Hasel can state: “It seems undeniable that the NT is from beginning to end christocentric. Jesus Christ is the dynamic, unifying center of the NT. . . . Jesus Christ is the beginning, center, and end of the NT. [*However,*] The NT’s christocentricity must not be transformed into a structure on the basis of which a NT theology is to be written.”<sup>28</sup>

George E. Ladd had already warned in the fifties that the use of a single organizing center can mean a great loss to NT theology, because the richness of NT theology may be sacrificed.<sup>29</sup> A preconceived center should never function as an organizing principle of NT theology. It can become a measuring rod by which other statements are evaluated.<sup>30</sup> “In the quest to find and explicate the unity one must refrain from making the theology of one book or group of books the norm for what is NT theology.”<sup>31</sup>

- (3) *Canon Within the Canon?* The question of whether or not NT theology deals with the entire canon or works with a canon within the canon is related to the previous two questions. As soon as one chooses a structuring theme which forms a mold for all subsequent investigation, a canon within the canon is created. Theologians are aware of this fact. Nevertheless, some even defend such an approach. However, there is also a number of theologians who reject a canon within the canon. Hasel quotes I. Lönning’s insightful statement that “we cannot make the ‘canon within the canon’ into the canon.”<sup>32</sup>
- (4) *Built on the Canon and Limited to the Canon?* The question is: “Does New Testament theology deal with the text of the New Testament or with something outside of the text—such as the unfolding or early Christian religion, the events of salvation history, the historical Jesus in particular, or an understanding of human existence? . . . For William Wrede the

---

<sup>27</sup>Hasel, 143. Italics added.

<sup>28</sup>Hasel, 164. Word added for emphasis sake.

<sup>29</sup>Cf., G. E. Ladd, “Eschatology and the Unity of NT Theology,” *Expository Times* 68 (1956/57): 268-273.

<sup>30</sup>Cf. Hasel, 158, 165. Luther’s principle of “was Christum treibet” is such a criterion.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 219.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 166. See Hasel’s discussion, 164-170.

proper subject matter of New Testament theology is the history of early Christian religion and theology—what was taught, believed, hoped for, striven for in the historical process itself—not the New Testament writings . . .”<sup>33</sup> We would suggest to limit NT theology to dealing with the text of the NT. “For Childs the canon—the *whole* canon and *nothing but* the canon—is the proper context for theological interpretation.”<sup>34</sup>

- (5) *The Place of Jesus in NT Theology?* With the distinction made between the biblical Jesus and the historical Jesus<sup>35</sup> the question had to be raised, what place Jesus has in NT theology. In case that the Gospels contain the theology of their respective authors, sources, or redactors as well as the theology of the early church and little to nothing of the theology of Jesus,<sup>36</sup> it is understandable that the message of Jesus is regarded as a presupposition for NT theology only<sup>37</sup> rather than a part of NT theology. Walter Schmithals supporting Bultmann “denies—at least tacitly—that the historical Jesus properly belongs within the scope of New Testament theology . . .”<sup>38</sup> But does Matthew’s theology, Mark’s theology, Luke’s theology, and John’s theology indeed no longer reflect the theology of Jesus? “The rejection of the biblical portrait of Jesus in favor of a hypothetical historical Jesus, and the effort to trace the stages between the two, is not the result of open-minded inductive study of our sources, but of philosophical

---

<sup>33</sup>Via, 4-5 and 25.

<sup>34</sup>Via, 28.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 104, states: “Historical reconstruction cannot attain objectively certain truth about the past—what actually happened. It must deal with lesser and greater probabilities. But only those with scholarly expertise are competent to assess the complex evidence and reach conclusions about the probability of what the historical Jesus actually said. . . The historian, as historian, does not have the authority to limit the possible theological significance of what he or she thinks Jesus probably said to a meaning rigidly circumscribed by the original context. Theological truth depends upon theological reflection on the contribution that a probable saying of Jesus might make to our understanding of the interrelationships among God, humankind, and the world. And that reflection is shaped by the religious and social location of the interpreter.”

<sup>36</sup>I. Howard Marshall, *The Origins of New Testament Christology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 33, 43-58.

<sup>37</sup>Cf., Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (New York: Scribner, 1951), 3.

<sup>38</sup>Via, 17.

presuppositions about the nature of history.”<sup>39</sup>

- (6) *NT Theology or History-of-Religion?* Is there anything such as NT theology or is it merely the history of the primitive religion? “For Wrede New Testament theology should be a strictly historical study of the early Christian religion.”<sup>40</sup> The emphasis is on religion not on theology. He is supported by J. M. Robinson.<sup>41</sup> To some extent the issue is “whether the NT is the production of the church or whether the church is the production of the NT.”<sup>42</sup> H. Koester tries to recover the historical development of early Christianity and regards noncanonical texts as of equal value as canonical texts.<sup>43</sup> R. H. Fuller “takes various religion-historical contexts as his primary structural units.” Using sources in Palestinian Judaism, Hellenistic Judaism, and Gentile religion he shows how christological titles were “interpreted in the different religion-historical settings.”<sup>44</sup> The history-of-religion approach has not found universal consent. In spite of Robinson’s suggestion to reduce NT theology to the history of primitive Christian religion NT theologies were produced.
- (7) *Normative or Descriptive Only?* The issue is hotly debated whether or not biblical theology is descriptive only.<sup>45</sup> It describes how the church of the first century understood theology, but has no normative value for our present generation. Some would argue in favor of a normative character, whereas many perceive NT theology solely as a descriptive task.<sup>46</sup> On the other

---

<sup>39</sup>George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), 179.

<sup>40</sup>Via, 72.

<sup>41</sup>Hasel, 135; Via, 72.

<sup>42</sup>Hasel, 135.

<sup>43</sup>Cf., Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament, Volume 2: History and Literature of Early Christianity*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), xix.

<sup>44</sup>Via, 19-20.

<sup>45</sup>See Hasel’s discussion, 136-139.

<sup>46</sup>A distinction has been made between what the text meant to the original audience and what the text means today. There are those who sharply distinguish between these two meanings. For them biblical theology is descriptive only, Scripture is culturally conditioned and may, therefore, have nothing or not much to say to a different culture. Others equate what the text meant and what the text means or ignore the issue. See, Richard N. Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical*

hand some would suggest a “hermeneutical component as an integral part of New Testament theology.”<sup>47</sup> This is to say that the NT messages still speak to our times. However, it is claimed that the NT authors “were not focally concerned about what the traditions and sources that they used originally meant, but they rather drew out and constructed from these materials meanings that they adapted and directed to the situations in which they wrote.”<sup>48</sup> Today scholars also find meanings in biblical texts that seem to be relevant for our present generation. Yet, there is more than one meaning, because meaning is shaped by the respective interpreter and his social and religious location.<sup>49</sup> Such an approach even if called hermeneutical-normative is different from a normative understanding of NT theology, in which NT theology has normative and not only descriptive value because Scripture as the Word of God has a quality that transcends eras and cultures.

- (8) *NT Theology as a Historical Project?* That NT texts have a historical dimension and that therefore also a theology of the NT will contain a historical dimension is difficult to deny. The question is, however, whether or not this historical dimension must be subjected to the historical-critical method. When Via talks about NT theology as historical<sup>50</sup> he seems to have in mind a historical-critical approach to the NT texts, because it is the historical-critical methods which he defend. He mentions S. Hauerwas who “believes that Christians should not side with postmodernism—because Christians have a stake in history . . . This last claim, however, does not prompt him to recognize that taking history seriously requires critical historiography—historical criticism of the Bible.” But then Via claims and affirms that “Critical historical inquiry is not a dispensable option.”<sup>51</sup>
- (9) *Relation of NT Theology to the OT?* The relationship between the two testaments is a crucial

---

*Criticism* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 197-198. Cf., the discussion on Krister Stendahl in Via, 32-33.

<sup>47</sup>Via, 59.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

<sup>49</sup>See the discussion in Via, 46-48.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 31, 59.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 105, 107.

question.<sup>52</sup> Whereas some scholars have overemphasized the NT and underestimated the OT, others have taken the opposite approach. Some have argued for absolute theological discontinuity whereas others have recognized that the OT sheds light on the NT and the NT elucidates the OT. Both depend on each other and stand in a reciprocal relationship. Although they must be studied on their own, they also must be studied in light of each other. Hasel points to some important links between the two testaments such as *h i s t o r i c a l* connections, scriptural dependence (i.e., OT quotations in the NT), vocabulary, themes, typology, the pattern promise-fulfillment, salvation history, and the unity of the eschatological perspective.

## V. Approaches to NT Theology

Via mentions two basic approaches to NT theology, namely the thematic approach and the historical-chronological approach.<sup>53</sup> Hasel distinguishes (1) the thematic approach (A. Richardson, K. H. Schelkle), (2) the existentialist approach (R. Bultmann, H. Conzelmann), (3) the historical approach (W. Kümmel, J. Jeremias), and (4) the salvation history approach (O. Cullmann, G. E. Ladd, L. Goppelt).<sup>54</sup> All approaches have some weaknesses, e.g., the thematic approach should not use a structure superimposed on the NT, and the existentialist approach collapses theology into anthropology and avoids treating NT documents that do not lend themselves to existentialist interpretation.

How then should we approach NT theology. Hasel suggests six points.<sup>55</sup>

- (1) *Biblical Theology is a theological-historical discipline.* This means that we must move from the historical level of investigation to the theological and discuss what the text meant as well as it means today. NT theology must be both historical and theological from the beginning. The categories and themes of investigation must be derived from the NT itself. Proper

---

<sup>52</sup>See Hasel's important chapter, 171-205

<sup>53</sup>Via, 7.

<sup>54</sup>Hasel, 72-132.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 204-220.

exegesis must inform theology and vice versa. The interpreter must count on the reality of God and have faith.

- (2) *A NT theology is founded on the materials taken from the NT.* It is limited to the canon in the sense that it provides theological interpretations of biblical books, blocks of biblical books, and the entire NT. It values archeological and other insights. No structure is superimposed from the outside. NT theology allows each NT book to state its own message and theological emphasis while at the same time acknowledging unity in diversity.
- (3) *It is best to begin with Jesus and his message.* This message is found in the Gospels and some other places of the NT. Pauline, Petrine, Joannine, and other theologies may be presented in chronological order.
- (4) *Major themes of the NT should be drawn together.* NT theology is not content to stay on the level of its individual authors' contributions and present their theology. It also draws together their motifs, themes, and concepts.
- (5) *An overarching theology should be formulated.* "A seemingly successful way to come to grips with the question of unity is to take the various major longitudinal themes and concepts and explicate where and how the variegated theologies are intrinsically related to each other."<sup>56</sup>
- (6) *NT theology is part of a larger whole.* It considers the larger context of the entire Bible, in our case, the OT.

## **Conclusion**

NT theology is an important field of study informing us about major themes of the NT, derived from exegesis and yet informing exegesis, furnishing data for systematic theology, and addressing us today. It is shaped by our presuppositions and the choice of a hermeneutical method. An approach that allows the NT to speak for itself, in which NT books are studied, and the results are compared with each other and major themes be drawn together is helpful.

---

<sup>56</sup>Hasel, 218-219.

Ekkehardt Müller, Th.D., D.Min

© Copyright January 2004  
All Rights Reserved