

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY?

Qual é o propósito e o escopo da Teologia do Novo Testamento?

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ABSTRACT

It seems a *prima facie* concern to consider the *viability* of the enterprise of New Testament theology, as it is a hotly debated issue in New Testament scholarship. It seems there is much confusion regarding New Testament theology, especially, in comparison/contrast to the fields of biblical, systematic, and practical theology. Of utmost importance is the question, “Is New Testament theology a viable enterprise?” If so, how does it contribute to the field of New Testament scholarship, specifically, and to Christianity in general?

Keywords: New Testament. Theology. New Testament Theology.

RESUMO

Parece uma preocupação à **primeira vista** considerar a viabilidade do empreendimento da teologia do Novo Testamento, pois é uma questão extremamente debatida entre os estudiosos do Novo Testamento. Parece que há

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muita confusão em relação à teologia do Novo Testamento, especialmente, em comparação / contraste com os campos da teologia bíblica, sistemática e prática. É de extrema importância a questão: «A teologia do Novo Testamento é um empreendimento viável?» Em caso afirmativo, como contribui para os estudiosos do Novo Testamento, especificamente, e para o Cristianismo em geral?

Palavras-chave: Novo Testamento. Teologia. Teologia do Novo Testamento.

INTRODUCTION: IS NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY A VIABLE ENTERPRISE?

In beginning this essay, it seems a *prima facie* concern to consider the *viability* of the enterprise of New Testament theology, as it is a hotly debated issue in New Testament scholarship.² It seems there is much confusion regarding New Testament theology, especially, in comparison/contrast to the fields of biblical, systematic, and practical theology (see below). Of utmost importance is the question, “Is New Testament theology a viable enterprise?”³ If so, how does it contribute to the field of New Testament scholarship, specifically, and to Christianity in general? Is New Testament theology purely *descriptive* and limited strictly to the academy (so Gabler, Wrede, and Räisänen⁴); or is it *prescriptive* in nature, intended for the faith, life, and worship of the church (so Watson); or, perhaps, it is a combination of both (so Carson, Childs)? It is in consideration and reflection on these important questions that this essay now turns.

There is much optimism in the viability of New Testament theology. Dunn agrees, “[T]o write a biblical theology of the NT is an entirely viable venture. Not only so, it should have become clear that a *New Testament* theology cannot but be a *biblical* theology of the

² ROWLAND, Christopher; TUCKETT, Christopher. *The Nature of New Testament Theology*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006, p. xi–xii.

³ THIELMAN, Frank. *Theology of the New Testament: a Canonical and Synthetic Approach*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005, p. 19.

⁴ RÄISÄNEN, Heikki. “Towards an Alternative to New Testament Theology: ‘Individual Eschatology’ as an Example,” in *The Nature of New Testament Theology: Essays in Honour of Robert Morgan* (eds. Christopher Rowland and Christopher Tuckett). Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006, p. 167–168.

NT (emphasis original).⁵ In terms of its value to New Testament scholarship, New Testament theology is to be a *biblical* theology according to Dunn. At the heart of New Testament theology is its moorings to the text of the canonical New Testament. In regards to its contributions to the Christianity, New Testament theology is centered on the *kerygma* of the nascent Christian faith—that is, Christ and him crucified (1 Cor 2:2).⁶ It is in Paul's, λόγος τοῦ σταυροῦ (1 Cor 1:18), his *theologia crucis*,⁷ that New Testament theology (and, indeed, Christianity) finds its locus of meaning. Peter Stuhlmacher, in referencing the robust theology of Luther, rotundly resounds that Paul's theology of the cross is rightly the, “[C]limax and touchstone of every proper theology in general.”⁸

The concept of the viability of New Testament theology has been a hotly debated topic for over two hundred years—since Gabler's infamous address in 1787,⁹ and Wrede's seminal work¹⁰ over a century later (1897). For Gabler and Wrede, New Testament theology is properly a *descriptive* venture—that is, a historical discipline using the specialized historical-critical tools of the academy—though, Wrede does leave some room for theology in his view.¹¹ Other scholars, such as Watson, see New Testament theology as a purely *prescriptive* task—that is, an essentially theological, pragmatic task that is properly used in the living, worshipping, “theologizing”¹² life of the church.¹³ Dunn

⁵ DUNN, James D. G. *New Testament Theology: An Introduction*, Library of Biblical Theology. Nashville: Abingdon, 2009, p. 153.

⁶ WOLTER, Michael. “The Theology of the Cross and the Quest for a Doctrinal Norm,” in *The Nature of New Testament Theology: Essays in Honour of Robert Morgan* (eds. Christopher Rowland and Christopher Tuckett). Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006, p. 266.

⁷ WOLTER, 2006, p. 264.

⁸ STUHLMACHER, Peter. *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (2 vols). Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992/1999, p. 322.

⁹ ASHTON, John. “History and Theology in New Testament Studies,” in *The Nature of New Testament Theology: Essays in Honour of Robert Morgan* (eds. Christopher Rowland and Christopher Tuckett). Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006, p. 1.

¹⁰ ASHTON, 2006, p. 1.

¹¹ ASHTON, 2006, p. 1.

¹² HOOKER, Morna. “The Nature of New Testament Theology,” in *The Nature of New Testament Theology: Essays in Honour of Robert Morgan* (eds. Christopher Rowland and Christopher Tuckett). Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006, p. 77.

¹³ WATSON, Francis. “The Gospel of John and New Testament Theology,” in *The Nature of New Testament Theology: Essays in Honour of Robert Morgan* (eds. Christopher Rowland and Christopher Tuckett). Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006, p. 248.

tends to agree and seems to take a combined approach, a *via media* between the *descriptive* and *prescriptive* approaches to New Testament theology. Dunn elucidates that the point of New Testament theology is not to treat its various corpora, “[A]s the cold and petrified remains of a volcanic eruption that took place centuries earlier, but as lava streams still hot and moving, still capable of scalding and burning. . . . [W]e see Paul’s letters as his theologizing, as expressions of living theology”¹⁴ For Dunn, while historical-critical tools and methodologies are, indeed, an important part of the task,¹⁵ a strictly *descriptive*, purely historical approach to New Testament theology does not capture the dynamic essence of the New Testament writers’ “theologizing.”¹⁶ While the viability of the enterprise of New Testament theology has been made clear, what of its goal/purpose?

1. WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY?

While certainly not a monolithic, unitary consensus, New Testament scholars seem to agree on the τέλος—that is, goal/purpose—of New Testament theology. For Muddiman, this purpose entails the interrogation of the New Testament texts, “[F]or the truth claims that they make and that reads the texts in the light of their impact through a variety of interpretations on the later history of the church.”¹⁷ Collins states in regards to the τέλος of New Testament theology, “[T]he activity of constructing such a theology takes place in and for the Church.”¹⁸

Bultmann clarifies,

The science called New Testament theology has the task of setting forth the theology of the New Testament; i.e. [*sic*] of setting forth the theological thoughts of the New Testament writings, both

¹⁴ DUNN, 2009, p. 16.

¹⁵ DUNN, James D. G. *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity*. 3rd ed. London: SCM, 2006, p. xxv–xxxiv.

¹⁶ DUNN, 2006, p. 157–59.

¹⁷ MUDDIMAN, John. “Deutero-Paulinism, Pseudonymity and the Canon,” in *The Nature of New Testament Theology: Essays in Honour of Robert Morgan* (eds. Christopher Rowland and Christopher Tuckett). Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006, p. 165.

¹⁸ COLLINS, Adela Yarbro. “Apocalypticism and New Testament Theology,” in *The Nature of New Testament Theology: Essays in Honour of Robert Morgan* (eds. Christopher Rowland and Christopher Tuckett). Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006, p. 40.

those that are explicitly developed . . . and those that are implicitly at work To make clear this believing self-understanding in its reference to the kerygma is the task of a presentation of New Testament theology.¹⁹

What all of these three authors have in common in their description of the τέλος, or proper goal, of New Testament theology is the necessity of the *prescriptive*, ecclesiastical element. In other words, “doing” New Testament theology is an exercise of *religiosity*. This is an axiomatic fact in that New Testament theology begins with *religious* documents—Scripture—and ends with the proper application of these *religious* documents in the living, worshiping, serving *bios* of Christ’s Bride—that is the church. Rowland and Bennett agree,

[P]ractical discipleship becomes the dynamic action within which theological understanding takes place. . . . It means interpreting everyday life by means of the Bible rather than the study of the Bible being an end itself [contra Gabler, Wrede, and Räisänen’s *descriptive* approach] cut off from the involvement in everyday living and the exegetical insights which they offer to the theological task.²⁰

Thus, any New Testament theology worthy of the moniker must have at its heart a *prescriptive*, practical application of the “theologizing”—that is, the living theology—of the early church properly applied and contextualized to the life, worship, and service evidenced within a twenty-first-century context. To do requires the fusing of the two horizons of ancient, New Testament text and twenty-first-century interpreter. But what of the *scope* of New Testament theology? Can one rightly speak of a *monolithic* “New Testament Theology” or should one even confine New Testament theology to the corpora of the canonical New Testament? It is in consideration to these and other questions that this essay now turns.

¹⁹ BULTMANN, Rudolf. *Theology of the New Testament*. Vol. II. Translated by Kendrick Grobel. New York: Charles Scribners’ Sons, 1955, p. 237, 251.

²⁰ ROWLAND, Christopher; BENNETT, Zoë. “Action is the Life of All: New Testament Theology and Practical Theology,” in *The Nature of New Testament Theology: Essays in Honour of Robert Morgan* (eds. Christopher Rowland and Christopher Tuckett). Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006, p. 188.

2. THE SCOPE OF NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY: WHOSE, WHAT, WHICH?

The variegated history of New Testament theology seems to assume in *a priori* fashion, that it is proper to speak in such terms—“New Testament Theology.” Perhaps, an ethical reflection is in order of such a *prima facie* praxis. Dunn, perhaps more than any other New Testament scholar, has made this point abundantly clear.²¹ Questions immediately arise in such a keen reflection. Can one even rightly speak of a monolithic “New Testament Theology” or is it best to speak in terms of “New Testament Theologies?” When one speaks of “New Testament theology” is one referring specifically to the theology of the Jesus tradition, Johannine theology, Pauline theology, or is one referring to a *synthesized* approach (so Thielman)²² in studying the various repeated themes and approaches found throughout the various corpora in the canonical New Testament text? Thus, it seems appropriate to ask at this nascent stage of understanding the nature and scope of New Testament theology, “Whose theology?”

In answering such a seemingly obtuse and absconded question, one must not be encumbered with the minutiae of exegetical details in descriptive/historical observations, but must see clearly the proverbial prescriptive forest encompassing and consisting of the trees. At the heart of this question is the old, aforementioned issue of audience—i. e., whether New Testament theology is properly a *descriptive* discipline (for the academy) or *prescriptive* task (for the church). To pose this question in less technical terms, is the primary intent of New Testament theology to answer the question of what the text meant then (descriptive) or what the text means now (prescriptive)? What has been seen thus far in this study is that the answer to the rightful ownership of New Testament theology seems to be stated in “both-and,” not “either-or” terms. To clarify, New Testament theology is the rightful task of both the academy and the church.²³ Now that the question of “Whose?” has been answered, this essay now shifts to the next important question in discussing the topic at hand,—What is exactly is New Testament theology?

²¹ DUNN, 2006, p. 1-8.

²² THIELMAN, 2005, p. 40-42.

²³ THIELMAN, 2005, p. 33.

What is New Testament theology? What are its proper sources? Are they simply assumed to be the *prima facie* documents of the New Testament? Or is it acceptable to utilize the extra-canonical documents of Second Temple Judaism? Should the sources be thematic or topical in nature; or should implicit concepts (e. g., the concept of “Trinity”) be derived theologically from the various New Testament corpora themselves? Many attempts to define New Testament theology have been set forth by various scholars. Hooker defines New Testament theology as being “primarily an historical discipline.”²⁴ Bultmann defines it thus, “New Testament theology consists in the unfolding of those ideas by means of which Christian faith makes sure of its own object, basis, and consequences.”²⁵ James Dunn sees New Testament theology (like Hooker) as “theologizing”—that is, the Darwinistically evolving, living, lava-like tradition flowing out from the ancient text and into the praxis of the local church.²⁶ So are these definitions an *antinomy* of irreducible contradiction, or are there common elements synthesized within each? First of all, the main difference goes back to the old “audience” debate (a recurring theme throughout any viable attempt at a New Testament theology) with Hooker taking a primarily historical/descriptive approach in defining New Testament theology, while both Bultmann and Dunn recognize the primacy of the theological/prescriptive elements. Does this mean that the variegated voices of Gabler/Wrede/Räisänen/Hooker and Bultmann/Dunn are utterly, and hopelessly irreconcilable? Perhaps it is best to see these seemingly disparate voices as singing the same tune just in different arrangements or perhaps, a better analogy, as two sides of the same coin. Thielman elucidates this fact in that if one restricts New Testament theology to merely answering the prescriptive question, “What the text means now,” it is too narrow a focus and neglects the nuanced, individual distinctions, and contributions within the various writers of Scripture.²⁷ Conversely, if one spends too much focus and attention on the purely descriptive side of the coin, then the text becomes the lifeless, “petrified remains” that Dunn so eloquently contrasts with the living, lava-like theology

²⁴ HOOKER, 2006, p. 75.

²⁵ BULTMANN, Rudolf. **Theology of the New Testament**. Vol. I. Translated by Kendrick Grobel. New York: Charles Scribners’ Sons, 1951, p. 3.

²⁶ DUNN, 2009, p. ix.

²⁷ THIELMAN, 2005, p. 27.

found within the earliest expressions of Christianity.²⁸ Thus, New Testament theology can rightly be considered as a *via media* approach utilizing both descriptive and prescriptive methodologies of the academy and the pragmatic theology of the church in discerning not merely the content, context, and crux of the message inherent within the ancient text, but must also fuse this descriptive data with the horizon of the theological praxis of the modern/postmodern church. Now that a working definition for New Testament theology has been developed, a consideration as to the proper sources/scope of New Testament theology is in order.

It would be, perhaps, too naïve or sophomoric to many New Testament scholars to simply assume in a *a priori* fashion that the appropriate scope of New Testament theology be the canonical New Testament documents themselves. Räisänen recalcitrantly remarks,

The NTTs practically limit their *source material* to the New Testament—sometimes to even key writings within it [adopting a canon within canon approach] . . . In my draft, too, Paul does get a lot of attention, but he is not treated as anything like a norm. *The Gospel of Thomas* and other Nag Hammadi writings are treated on the same level as canonical writings. Patristic authors are also given consideration (emphasis original).²⁹

Is Räisänen's approach to New Testament theology correct? While it is, indeed, important to understand and interact with, in a descriptive manner, the extra-canonical sources of Second Temple Judaism, such as the Nag Hammadi codices (NHC) and the Qumranic Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS), it is important to remember that the prescriptive element of *theology* is to be derived from the only religious documents that the Christian church has deemed canonical—the Old and New Testament Scriptures. Thus, the aforementioned *a priori* assumption of the proper source of New Testament *theology* may not be too naïve after all. This focus of this essay now shifts to the final question regarding the scope of New Testament theology—the question of *diversity*, otherwise known as the question of “Which?”

Once the source of New Testament theology is rightly seen to

²⁸ DUNN, 2009, p. 16.

²⁹ RÄISÄNEN, 2006, p. 168.

be the canonical New Testament text, itself, the question then becomes, “What of the diversity inherent within the New Testament?” James Dunn has famously elucidated this problem (perhaps, focusing too much on the diversity and not enough on the unity) in his controversial monograph.³⁰ If Christ is the center of New Testament theology, then which Christ—the Jesus of history or the Christ of Faith? If Bultmann is correct in his approach to New Testament theology seeing the importance of the *kerygma*—that is, the gospel message of the early church—then, whose *kerygma*—Jesus’s, Paul’s, or John’s? Or is it better to speak in terms of canonical *kerygmata*? In speaking of the canonical New Testament as religious Scripture for “Christianity,” which “Christianity” is the referent—Paul’s “Hellenistic Christianity,” Peter and James’ “Jewish Christianity,” or “early catholic Christianity?” Obviously, one could continue this line of thinking infinitely and to do so is not helpful or constructive in evaluating approaches to New Testament theology.³¹ The key to remember in consideration of the digression of diversity that Dunn sets forth in his work, is that there are numerous “web-like” threads³² of continuity running throughout canonical Scripture—what of the Grand Narrative of *Heilsgeschichte* in God’s salvific acts in reconciling fallen humanity (indeed, the entire cosmos) to himself?³³ What of the primacy of the theology of the cross or of Christology? In consideration of these unifying factors within canonical Scripture, it seems Dunn may have overstated his case.³⁴ Does Scripture testify to its own veracity, its own usefulness in determining the theological tenets of the Christian life? Indeed, it does—in texts such as 2 Timothy 3:16–17 and Hebrews 4:12.

Hebrews 4:12 supports Dunn’s³⁵ and Hooker’s³⁶ analogy of New Testament theology as “theologizing” as the author of Hebrews explains Scripture in terms of the present active participle *Zōn* and the dynamic adjective of *ἐνεργής*. While Scripture is alive, moving, full of energy as Hebrews 4:12 vividly elucidates, it is not an endless,

³⁰ DUNN, 2006, p. 11–33.

³¹ SCHNELLE, Udo. *Theology of the New Testament*. Translated by M. Eugene Boring. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009, p. 25–27, 49–51.

³² ROWLAND; BENNETT, 2006, p. 189.

³³ A plethora of texts such as Gen 3:15; 12:3; Exo 19:4–6; Ezek 33:11; Isa 53; Jer 31:31; John 3:16–17; Eph 2; Rev 21–22 immediately come to mind.

³⁴ THIELMAN, 2005, p. 34–38.

³⁵ DUNN, 2009, p. 10–14.

³⁶ HOOKER, 2006, p. 77.

puzzling, antithetical conundrum of thorny knots and tangles of antinomies. If there are supposed antinomies within the text of Scripture, it is an issue at odds with the *exegete*, himself, not with the *content* to be exegeted. As Paul succinctly states in his Corinthian correspondence, οὐ γάρ ἐστιν ἀκαταστασίας ὁ θεὸς ἀλλὰ εἰρήνης. Ὡς ἐν πάσαις ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις τῶν ἁγίων (1Cor 14:33).

3. NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY: A MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

Since God is not the so-called, “Author of confusion,” what is one to make with the seeming amalgam of approaches and definitions to New Testament theology? More specifically, how does one see the inherent relationships and interactions between New Testament theology and the related disciplines such as biblical theology, systematic theology, and practical theology? This essay has already set forth a working definition above of New Testament theology as, “[A] *via media* approach utilizing both descriptive and prescriptive methodologies of the academy and the church in discerning not merely the content, context, and crux of the message inherent within the ancient text, but also fuses this descriptive data with the horizon of the theological praxis of the modern/postmodern church. Geerhardus Vos defines biblical theology in holistic terms as follows, “[T]he exhibition of the organic process of supernatural revelation in its historic continuity and multiformity.”³⁷ Grenz defines systematic theology thus, “The attempt to summarize the religious truth or the belief system of a religious group . . . through an organized system of thought carried out within a particular cultural and intellectual context”³⁸ Practical theology, perhaps, a bit less conspicuous and distinctly defined, may be succinctly summarized in terms of the metaphor of a “web.”³⁹ Rowland and Bennett elucidate, “In the tasks of doing New Testament theology there is an interweaving of

³⁷ VOS, Geerhardus. “The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and a Theological Discipline,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos* (Edited by Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.). Phillipsburg: P & R, 1980, p. 15.

³⁸ GRENZ, Stanley J.; GURETZKI, David; NORDLING, Cherith Fee. *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms*. Downers Grove: IVP, 1999, p. III.

³⁹ ROWLAND; BENNETT, 2006, p. 188-189.

the threads of tradition into the web of one's own experience, so the structure of one's own life affects what makes sense in tradition... [P]ractical theology has as its starting place, not in detached reflection on Scripture [descriptive] and tradition [prescriptive] but the present life..."⁴⁰

To synthesize, each discipline can be thought of in terms of the theologian being respectively an "exhibitionist" (biblical theology), an "organizer" (systematic theology) and a "spider" (practical theology). As comical as this may sound (a New Testament theologian who is at once an "organizing exhibitionist" who moonlights as a so-called, "spider-man!") the analogies are actually quite helpful. A biblical theologian's first task is to dig deep into the text of Scripture, mining the text to unearth its multifaceted, many-colored gems. This descriptive "mining" process is performed to expose, or indeed, *exhibit* the text in all its variegated beauty. The systematic theologian then collects and *organizes* the evidence *exhibited* by the biblical theologian into doctrinal categories for the church. The practical theologian who, in "spider-man" fashion listens/feels for the resonance echoing (like the practical theologian's own brand of "spider-sense") from the web-like threads of everyday life, applies the doctrinal discoveries of the systematic theologian to the contemporary Christian life.⁴¹

In sum, New Testament theology can (and possibly ought) to be thought of in synergistic terms—the overarching whole is greater than the sum of its parts. New Testament theology combines elements of all three above disciplines—biblical, systematic, and practical—and synthesizes them into a dynamic, "performance"⁴² of the New Testament. In taking away this *in toto* perspective of "doing" New Testament theology, one sees confusion and overlap between the four terms. But in seeing New Testament theology as the overarching system combining all three of these disciplines *in toto* as a synergistic system, it simplifies and harmonizes the disciplines into a completed whole.

⁴⁰ ROWLAND; BENNETT, 2006, p. 187-188.

⁴¹ ROWLAND; BENNETT, 2006, p. 194.

⁴² ROWLAND; BENNETT, 2006, p. 192-193.

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