

**ZONDERVAN™**

*Theology of the New Testament*  
Copyright © 2005 by Frank Thielman

Requests for information should be addressed to:  
Zondervan, *Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530*

---

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Thielman, Frank.

Theology of the New Testament : a canonical and synthetic approach / Frank Thielman.  
p. cm.

Summary: "A basic resource for serious teachers, pastors, scholars, or lay people interested in learning about the theology of the New Testament" — Provided by publisher.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-10: 0-310-21132-8 (alk. paper)

ISBN-13: 978-0310-21132-7

1. Bible. N.T.—Theology. 2. Bible. N.T.—Canonical criticism. I. Title.

BS2397.T445 2005

230'.0415—dc22

2004030070

CIP

---

This edition printed on acid-free paper.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the *Holy Bible: New International Version*®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

*Interior design by Sherri Hoffman*

*Printed in the United States of America*

---

05 06 07 08 09 10 11 12 /❖ DCI/ 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# CONTENTS

Preface .....	9
Abbreviations .....	13

## INTRODUCTION

1. The Theology of the New Testament: The Basic Questions .....	19
---	----

## ONE

---

### THE GOSPELS AND ACTS

2. The Persistence and Importance of a Fourfold Gospel .....	45
3. Mark: The Death of God's Son as Good News .....	57
4. Matthew: New Wine in Old Skins .....	84
5. Luke–Acts: The Place of Christians in the Progress of Salvation History ..	111
6. John: Faith in Jesus as the Means to Eternal Life .....	150
7. Four Diverse Witnesses to the One Gospel of Jesus Christ .....	181

## TWO

---

### THE PAULINE LETTERS

8. The Coherence and Center of Paul's Theology .....	219
9. First Thessalonians: Maintaining Faith, Love, and Hope in the Midst of Suffering .....	234
10. Second Thessalonians: Perseverance Despite Persecution and False Teaching .....	250
11. Galatians: The Grace of God and the Truth of the Gospel .....	262
12. First Corinthians: A Plea for Peace, Holiness, and Fidelity .....	276
13. Philippians: The Importance of the Gospel's Progress .....	307
14. Second Corinthians: Power Perfected in Weakness .....	323
15. Romans: The Gospel of God's Righteousness .....	342
16. Colossians: Christ Preeminent in Cosmos and History .....	375
17. Philemon: Reconciliation in Practice .....	387
18. Ephesians: The Unity of Church and Cosmos in Christ .....	393
19. First Timothy: The Church as Pillar and Foundation of Truth .....	408
20. Titus: Knowing God, Doing Good, and Making Salvation Attractive .....	423
21. Second Timothy: Faithfulness to the Gospel .....	430
22. The Common Emphases and Central Convictions of Paul's Letters .....	438

### THREE

---

#### THE NON-PAULINE LETTERS AND THE REVELATION OF JOHN

23. Finding Unity in the Non-Pauline Letters and Revelation . . . . .	483
24. James: The Wisdom of the Undivided Life . . . . .	496
25. Jude: Contending for the Faith against a Perversion of God's Grace . . . . .	512
26. Second Peter: Ethics and Eschatology . . . . .	522
27. First John: The Truth about Jesus, His Death, and His Love Command . . .	536
28. Second John: Avoiding Those Who Have Abandoned Truth and Love . . .	556
29. Third John: Working Together with the Truth . . . . .	562
30. First Peter: On Suffering as a Christian . . . . .	569
31. Hebrews: Jesus as Perfecter of the Faith and Leader of the Faithful . . . . .	585
32. Revelation: Meaning amid Oppression . . . . .	612
33. The Clash of World Views in Hebrews to Revelation . . . . .	651

#### CONCLUSION

34. The Theological Unity of the New Testament . . . . .	681
Works Cited . . . . .	727
Scripture and Apocrypha Index . . . . .	763
Other Ancient Literature Index . . . . .	787
Subject Index . . . . .	791
Modern Author Index . . . . .	795

---

# INTRODUCTION

---

## **THE THEOLOGY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT: THE BASIC QUESTIONS**

Since the eighteenth century, the discipline of New Testament theology has come under close scrutiny. Should the discipline be abandoned? Some have said so. Does it only need to be restructured? Some have offered new models. In the discussion, two problems with the discipline have repeatedly emerged as most significant.

The first problem, it is said, is an unhealthy blend in the discipline of dogmatics with historical concerns. On the one hand, theological convictions influence New Testament theologians both in the conclusions they draw about the meaning of the New Testament texts and in their insistence on examining only the canonical documents. On the other hand, since the church values these documents largely for the historical claims made in them, New Testament theologians find that they must work as historians in much the same way that any historian would work with ancient texts. Is it possible to bring together faith and reason in this way, or must New Testament theologians bracket their own dogmatic presuppositions about the importance of the New Testament and place the canonical texts on a level with all other ancient texts? If so, then they should shift their attention away from the theologically biased investigation of “New Testament theology” to the more objective and universally useful task of describing the history of early Christian thought.

The second problem arises from the theological diversity of the New Testament texts. The New Testament documents not only express a variety of theological themes, but sometimes they speak in different ways on the same theme. Do these differences sometimes amount to contradiction? If not, why is the theological coherence of the New Testament sometimes so hard to detect? If so, is it accurate to speak of “New Testament theology” at all, as if we are speaking of some coherent whole?

### **THEOLOGY OR HISTORY?**

Since the sixteenth century, biblical theologians have struggled with the relationship between interpreting the Bible to find support for the church’s traditional theological teachings and interpreting the Bible within its own historical context without consideration for the theological convictions of the church. Because the church has traditionally held to the primacy of Scripture over its traditions (even if extrabiblical tradition is given great weight), ideally no conflict should arise. In fact, the church’s traditions and the theological emphases of the Bible have often been incompatible, and so any study of biblical theology has often been characterized by the tension between theological conviction and historical analysis.

Biblical theology arose early in the Reformation era as a discipline intended to chasten the church's unbiblical theological speculations and to hasten its reform. The emphasis at this time was more on theological reform than on sensitivity to the historical situations in which the biblical documents were composed. Later, biblical theology fell under the spell of Enlightenment rationalism, and some of its practitioners began to define the discipline in terms of a historically motivated and theologically independent study of the Bible that could use human reason to sit in judgment not only on the teachings of the church, but on the content of the Bible itself.

Out of this link between biblical theology and the Enlightenment arose a criticism of the discipline itself. Why speak of "biblical" theology at all? If the student of the biblical texts is to be truly an historian, then it is necessary to speak only of the history of Jewish and Christian thought and religion—to speak of the Bible, or of the New Testament, is already to speak in dogmatic language that the historian interested in the objective study of the past must find unacceptable.

Over the last three centuries, three criticisms of the discipline as theologically rather than historically grounded have been particularly influential. J. P. Gabler, William Wrede, and Heikki Räisänen, writing at the turn of the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries respectively, called for the liberation of the historical study of the Bible or early Christianity from the dogmatic concerns of the church. Gabler's seminal challenge differs from that of Wrede and Räisänen because it is simply a call for methodological clarity in the theological enterprise rather than a disparagement of the theologically motivated study of the Bible. Nevertheless, both Wrede and Räisänen understand themselves to be standing on the shoulders of Gabler. It is important, therefore, to consider Gabler's challenge to the discipline before evaluating the more direct attacks of Wrede and Räisänen. In order to understand all three thinkers and to put our criticisms of their challenges in historical perspective, it is necessary first to survey briefly the historical roots of biblical, and specifically New Testament, theology.

### The Early History of the Discipline

The development of a "biblical theology" had its roots in the age-old commitment of the church to govern its theology and practice by the canonical writings of the Old and New Testaments. One of the most important concerns of the Reformation was that the church reform its doctrine and worship so that it might be more faithful to the standards laid down in the Bible. In 1521, Luther's close friend and colleague at the University of Wittenburg, Philip Melancthon, published one of the earliest theological treatises of the Reformation—a brief treatment of important theological topics based on Luther's lectures on Paul's letter to the Romans given in the summer of 1519 and repeated the following year.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See the note of Wilhelm Pauck in his edition of *Loci Communes Theologici* in *Melancthon and Bucer* (LCC 19; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 18 n. 2. All further references to the *Loci communes* are to this edition. On the importance of the *Loci communes* for the origins of biblical theology see the historical sur-

vey in Ferdinand Christian Baur, *Vorlesungen über neutestamentliche Theologie*, ed. F. F. Baur (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1973; orig. ed. 1864), 2, and Otto Merk, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments in ihrer Anfangszeit* (MTS 9; Marburg: N. G. Elwert Verlag, 1972), 12.

This treatment of *Loci communes rerum theologicarum* (“Fundamental Theological Themes”) provided a list of important theological topics and then briefly explained the teaching of Scripture, and Scripture alone, on each topic.<sup>2</sup> Melancthon was weary of reading the lengthy speculations of medieval scholastic theologians on Christian theology and wanted instead to discover how the Bible itself, and particularly “Paul’s own compendium of Christian doctrine” in Romans, described the Christian religion.<sup>3</sup> This urge to tap speculative theologians on the shoulder and point them back to the Bible remained a constant theme in the early history of biblical theology as a discrete discipline. Melancthon puts it this way:

I am discussing everything sparingly and briefly because the book is to function more as an index than a commentary. I am therefore merely stating a list of the topics to which a person roaming through Scripture should be directed. Further, I am setting forth in only a few words the elements on which the main points of Christian doctrine are based. I do this not to call students away from the Scriptures to obscure and complicated arguments but, rather, to summon them to the Scriptures if I can.<sup>4</sup>

As the Reformation matured into Protestantism, however, Protestant thinkers began to refine their theological commitments and to develop complicated theological arguments of their own. In their works, Scripture was often used not so much to set the theological agenda but to demonstrate that the various theological principles that Protestants considered important, and which were now growing increasingly complex, were, in fact, biblical. Those who first used the term “biblical theology” to describe their theological studies made this proof-texting of preexisting theological systems their goal.<sup>5</sup> A new Protestant brand of scholasticism began to develop with “biblical theology” as its handmaid.

Under the influence of German pietism on one hand and rationalism on the other, biblical theology began to break away from this role as a prop for systematic theology. Pietism sought to remind Protestant orthodoxy both of the preeminence of the Bible in Christian belief and practice and of the place of religious experience in Christian commitment. It viewed a return to the study of the Bible for its own sake as a necessary antidote to the sterile theological debates that seemed to dominate Protestant scholasticism, much in the way they had dominated the theological scene prior to the Reformation.<sup>6</sup> In 1758, Anton Friderich Büsching made a complaint in a pamphlet

<sup>2</sup> The translation “Fundamental Theological Themes” belongs to Wilhelm Pauck. See his introduction to *Loci Communes Theologici*, 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Loci communes*, 22.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>5</sup> Again, see Baur, *Neutestamentliche Theologie*, 2–3, and in addition, the historical survey of Martin Kähler, “Biblische Theologie,” *Realencyklopädie für protestantische Theologie und Kirche*, 3rd ed., 24 vols. (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs’sche Buchhandlung, 1896–1913), 3:192–200, here at 193; Merk, *Biblische Theologie*, 15–17; Gerhard Hasel, *New Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 17.

<sup>6</sup> Kähler, “Biblische Theologie,” 193; Merk, *Biblische Theologie*, 18–20. The famous Pietist leader Philipp Jacob Spener (1635–1705) in the third part of his manifesto, *Pia desideria*, published in 1675, laid out a six-point program for the reform of the German church. His first point called for the renewed reading and study of the whole Bible—not merely the set lectionary texts—by individuals, groups, and families. See Philipp Jacob Spener, *Pia desideria*, ed. Kurt Aland (Kleine Texte für Vorlesungen und Übungen 170; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1964), 53–58.