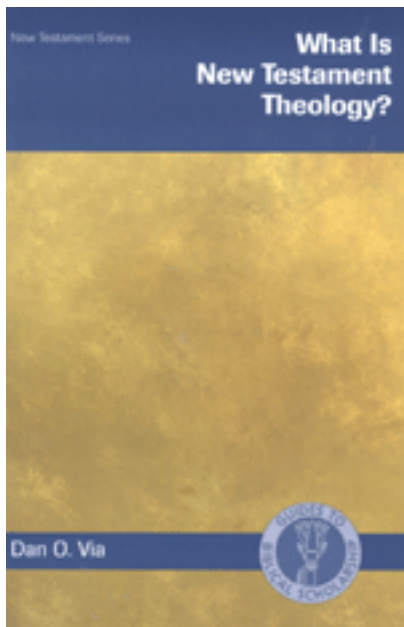


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Via, Dan O.

What Is New Testament Theology?

Guides to Biblical Scholarship: New Testament Series

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Kenneth A. Fox
Canadian Theological Seminary
Calgary AB T2P 3T5

In the context of a descriptive and critical survey of the enterprise of twentieth-century New Testament theology, Dan O. Via probes, questions, and stimulates critical thinking on the practice of New Testament theology. This book replaces Hendrikus Boers's contribution to the Guides to Biblical Scholarship: New Testament Series, *What Is New Testament Theology?* (Fortress, 1979) and is an excellent introduction to New Testament theology.

In the course of summarizing Boer's book in chapter 1, Via takes up Boers's distinction between the adjective *theological* and the noun *theology*. The former applies to general statements about God or religious expression, as found, for example, throughout the New Testament, and that provide the material for theology, which is seen as "a coherent, logical, necessary system of general ideas." Via employs this distinction to examine how New Testament scholars identify, articulate, and structure the theological potential of the New Testament.

Of vital interest to Via is how one does New Testament theology. He asks whether the discipline should deal with the New Testament itself or—as many scholars suppose—with something outside the text, such as the historical Jesus. He also asks whether New

Testament theology is to be seen as a strictly historical project, in the sense that it gives “an objective, descriptive account of the early Christian life-in-faith process or of the meaning of the New Testament texts in their first-century context,” a strictly hermeneutical program that acknowledges the proper role of the interpreter’s presuppositions, preunderstanding, or social location and that seeks to show that the text can address our present situation as a living summons,” or a dialectical interaction between historical interpretation and hermeneutical concerns.

In chapter 2 Via examines different ways that fifteen scholars have structured their theologies of the New Testament. Rudolf Bultmann, for example, follows a historical and chronological plan, but Joachim Jeremias generally structures his by means of theological themes. For James D. G. Dunn, a rigorous historical investigation of the theology of the New Testament is undertaken in the context of two interpretive categories: unity in diversity and diversity in unity. Peter Balla thinks a theology of the New Testament impossible unless the New Testament’s theology reflects a “unified whole” along the lines of what would later turn out to be orthodoxy. Via wonders if Balla is not driven by dogmatic concerns rather than by the nature of the evidence and thinks that the early Christian community may have had greater tolerance for diversity than Balla would allow.

Chapter 3 reviews three positions on the proper subject matter of New Testament theology. Wilhelm Wrede, Oscar Cullmann, and Jeremias look to various aspects of history behind the text, while Bultmann and Brevard S. Childs—both operating with a “canon within a canon”—see the New Testament writings as the proper subject matter. A. K. M. Adam, on the other hand, says New Testament theology should be “genuine theological discourse” treating the New Testament not “as a *container* of sense, but as a site to which the interpreter can *ascribe* sense in the light of his or her imaginative deployment of his or her own categories.”

In chapter 4 Via examines scholars who “seek to understand the theology of the New Testament rigorously in the light of its first-century context.” Scholars such as Wrede, Krister Stendahl, Heikki Räisänen, Burton L. Mack, Walter Schmithals, and Georg Strecker see New Testament theology as a strictly historical and objective enterprise. For Stendahl and Strecker, for example, it is the task of systematic theology to relate the theology of the past to the present. Then there are scholars such as Jeremias, Cullmann, G. B. Caird, Balla, and James Barr, who more or less pursue the historical project of New Testament theology in the interests of grounding contemporary faith. For Jeremias and Cullmann, if historical investigation leads to the conclusion that “Jesus did not believe that he was the messiah,” then faith must be renounced. The chapter wraps up with an

examination of two theological themes dominant in the twentieth century: eschatology (C. H. Dodd and Ernst Käsemann) and Christology (Willi Marxsen and Dunn).

In chapter 5, Via says that a hermeneutical component must be integral to the task of New Testament theology if the New Testament is “to speak pertinently and forcefully to the present time.” Rudolf Bultmann in particular is illustrative of someone who combined a historical-critical and hermeneutical approach to New Testament theology. However, Theodor W. Adorno, Dorothee Soelle, and Gareth Jones criticize him for his neglect “of the communal and social dimension of human life and history.” Via concurs: “comprehensive treatments of New Testament theology and New Testament ethics should not be set forth in separation from each other and that the hermeneutical vantage point for interpreting the New Testament should be sociopolitical as well as philosophical (existential).” The last half of chapter 5 examines ways in which scholars (James M. Robinson, John R. Donahue, Robin Scroggs, Robert W. Funk, N. T. Wright) have sought to move beyond Bultmann while still affirming that the task of New Testament theology is both historical and hermeneutical.

Chapter 6 begins with a discussion of how the terms *modernism* and *postmodernism* might be defined and distinguished. Then Via turns to examine the biblical theologies of Walter Brueggemann and A. K. M. Adam, both of which work within a postmodernist hermeneutical perspective and are highly critical of historical criticism. In response, Via finds himself in agreement with Adam when the latter affirms that “historical criticism should be relativized in the face of legitimate claims made by other hermeneutical approaches.” Furthermore, Via agrees with Adam that biblical texts do not have “only one original and authoritative meaning.” However, historical inquiry of the New Testament is still necessary, not because of “the ethos of modernism” with its “classical notions of truth, reason, and objectivity,” but because of the historical and particular nature of the revelation found in the New Testament itself. Via says, “For the New Testament God is manifested in concrete, specific, particular events, words, and images. Only historical investigation enables us to get some handle on the particularity of the vehicles of revelation.” In short, “The New Testament itself disqualifies any theology that is not historical-critical.”

In chapter 7 Via advances a position that is at the same time critical of “objective” history and the effacement of history in postmodernism. He wonders, in fact, whether the postmodern era even exists. All the same, he does not apply the label to himself for two reasons. First, there is “the difficulty of defining the postmodern mind and situation.” A good case can be made, he thinks, for seeing postmodernism as “a face of *modernity*.” Instead of working under the aegis of postmodernism he prefers a piecemeal approach whereby one engages the issues raised by postmodernism, such as “textuality, the

reader's role in creating meaning, historiography, and transcendence." Second, Via thinks that certain themes attributed to postmodernism, such as the rejection of transcendence and the disinclination to read anything as scripture (it deprives the text of the capacity to put the reader in question), are wrong.

In the final chapter Via proposes that New Testament theology consider four factors if theological interpretation is to be adequate. First, there is the context of the text and the impact of context on the text. For this historical criticism is necessary. Second, there is the content of the text. For this we have literary and existential criticism. Then there is the form and structure of the text, for which literary criticism is again necessary. Finally, one must deal with "the creative and constitutive role of the reader in the interpretive process," which existential criticism and its affirmation of the "inescapability of the hermeneutical circle acknowledges.