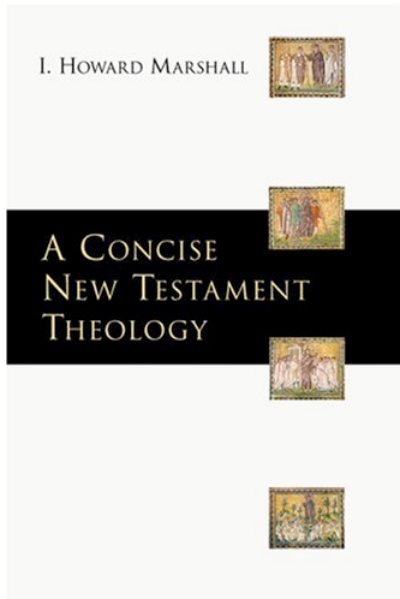


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**Marshall, I. Howard**

***A Concise New Testament Theology***

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I. Howard Marshall needs little introduction. Marshall is a leading evangelical scholar who has authored a number of commentaries and scholarly works on the New Testament. In recent years, Marshall has turned his attention to bridging the disciplines of biblical studies and theological studies. His *Beyond the Bible: Moving from Scripture to Theology* (2004) outlines a plan to discover theology in the Bible. In *A Concise New Testament Theology*, Marshall seeks to discover whether or not it is fair to speak of a common theology that the New Testament writers shared. The authors of the New Testament may have expressed these beliefs in different ways and these beliefs may have been at different stages of development in various books, but, nonetheless, there may be a common core theology that unites these writings in the New Testament canon.

As its title suggests, *A Concise New Testament Theology* is an abridgement of Marshall's *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel* (2004). At 765 pages, the earlier volume was thought to be unwieldy for the classroom. Consequently, this abridged volume was produced as an introductory text for students, pastors, and laypersons. The concise volume contains no footnotes, omits the scholarly debates on various issues, and contains only a brief two-page bibliography. Persons wanting a more in-depth treatment

of the issues with an even-handed assessment of other scholarly works should look to the larger volume.

Marshall's theology tackles each of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament separately. Marshall's hope is that, by dealing with the writings individually, one is better able to discern the theology of each writing. Each book of Scripture is examined via the literary context (Marshall refers to this as "The Theological Story"). Marshall then etches out the "Theological Themes" that emerge as the dominant motifs of the book. Each chapter is then succinctly summarized in a brief conclusion.

In an attempt to draw connections between the various New Testament writings, Marshall periodically collects related New Testament writings in order to compare their theologies. Thus, Marshall's sixth chapter examines the theology of the Synoptic Gospels, his seventeenth chapter deals with the theology of Paul's letters, and the twenty-first chapter compares the Synoptics and Paul's writings with the Johannine corpus. Finally, the author marshals a concluding chapter that offers remarks regarding the unity and diversity of the New Testament writings.

The layout of the book is such that Marshall groups the chapters together in logical sections and then deals with the New Testament writings within the sections in a chronological manner. Thus, the Synoptic Gospels are grouped together, followed by the Pauline writings, and the Johannine writings (including Revelation) and Hebrews with the General Epistles (excluding 1, 2, and 3 John). Since the dating of many of these writings is disputed, some may quibble about the sequencing of the books, but, frankly, any arrangement could be disputed. The reason for this arrangement seems to follow from Marshall's assertion that these writings "cannot all be treated on the flat but must be seen as documenting a gradual process of fuller understanding of Jesus' significance" (12). Moreover, "we need to be aware of the dangers of over-systematization of what was said and of reading back anachronistically the developed thinking and insights of later periods of Christian thought" (12). This is indeed a noble aspiration. However, if Marshall is trying to detect a chronological development of Christian thought, one wonders why he did not begin with Paul's writings rather than with the Synoptics. The answer to this question may be that Marshall regards the presentations of Jesus in the Gospels as "sufficiently close to historical reality [so as to] enable us to use them to understand his mission and message" (16). Thus, Marshall deals with the Synoptic Gospels first because in them we have the theology of Jesus. This order, however, is rather awkward because Marshall does not distinguish between the theology of Jesus and the developing understanding of that theology by Mark, Matthew, and Luke. One may concur that the Gospels reflect the teachings of Jesus, but as Marshall himself recognizes, each of the Evangelists had his own theological concerns. Marshall does not clearly distinguish

between the theology of Jesus and the theological directions pursued by the Gospel writers as they contextualized Jesus' teachings for different communities in the last half of the first century.

When Marshall addresses the issue of a common theology in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts, he first asserts that "the Evangelists do not anachronistically read back the life of the church into the pre-Easter period" (71). Nevertheless, there are common shared beliefs in the various Gospels, as well as various theological emphases. These emphases account for small differences in the expression of those beliefs. In Acts, however, there is a "very significant" shift in emphasis when compared with the Gospels. Whereas the Gospels emphasized Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom, Acts (and the early church) ignored this proclamation and centered its message upon the belief that Jesus was the Messiah, the proclamation of God's grace through the resurrection of Jesus, and the experience of the Spirit. Marshall notes that this was a natural progression of thought within the early church (80).

Paul's writings evince a further development of the Synoptic tradition. According to Marshall, "There is a developed entity that may fairly be called Paulinism, but it is in harmony with the teaching inspired by Jesus' mission and continued in his followers' mission in the early church" (185). Paul was fundamentally influenced by the Jewish Scriptures and Jewish apocalyptic theology. Here Paul and the Evangelists shared a common belief in the future coming of the Lord. Although Paul greatly developed his understanding of the need and means of salvation, this theme was also present in a more embryonic form in the Gospels and Acts. Likewise, Paul developed the concept of the community of believers. Both Paul and Luke emphasize the understanding of the inclusion of the Gentiles, but Paul added the concept of the church as the body of Christ and fleshed out details of the internal life of the congregations. It would have been nice if Marshall would have discussed the development of theological concepts from Paul's early writings to his later writings, but unfortunately this is lacking.

Much the same can be said for the Johannine writings. Marshall sees no discord between the Fourth Gospel and the Synoptics, nor does he see significant disparity between John's writings and Paul. John lacks the language of the kingdom that is strongly underscored in the Synoptics. Also, the secret of Jesus' messianic identity in the first three Gospels is openly discussed in the Fourth Gospel. Nevertheless, the Johannine writings identify Jesus similarly to the Synoptic Gospels, and John's emphasis upon life (or eternal life) has the same upshot as entrance into the kingdom (232). Johannine theology and Pauline theology "agree to a very considerable extent in their detailed content" (238). This is particularly evident in their affirmations of Jesus' preexistence, his role in creation, and his

sonship, as well as in their understanding of the Holy Spirit as a personal being rather than as a form of divine power.

Marshall concludes the volume with a final chapter describing the unity and diversity of the New Testament theologies. The main theme common to all writers of the New Testament is the concept of redemption. This is expressed in four stages: (1) a situation of human need caused by sin; (2) a saving act by God through Jesus Christ, whose death and resurrection provides redemption; (3) a new life, mediated by the Holy Spirit, which is given to those who place their faith in Jesus Christ; and (4) a redemptive consummation brought about by the return of Christ, accompanied by judgment and a new world.

The abridged volume gives a simplistic impression that belies the complexity of many of these issues. However, that is the nature of an abridgment. The larger volume alerts the readers of these issues. Given that caveat, this volume suitably meets the needs of its audience. As a complement to the larger volume, the abridged volume presents the results of Marshall's work and is an excellent resource for introductory classes.