

IS THERE A CENTRE OR COMMON STRUCTURE FOR NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY?

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INTRODUCTION

The question on whether there is a centre or common structure to the NT theology is an important one. Scholars from different theological background have contributed immensely to the on-going debate. In this paper, the author carefully explores the diversity of the NT theology as evidenced in the NT writings and then proceeds to the question of a convergence for the NT theology.

After a careful interaction with scholars, the author then reflects substantially on the positions of the scholars and then takes a position with a view to formulate an application for life and ministry.

BACKGROUND TO THE QUESTION OF A CENTRE OF NT THEOLOGY

1.0 The Nature of the Diversity within the New Testament

Guthrie (45-51) discussed three types of diversity or variety noticeable in the NT theology – diversity of forms, diversity of writings and the evolution or development of theology within the NT. Pertaining to the diversity of forms, in the NT, the four types of literature or genre (gospel, acts, epistles and apocalypse) all have their distinctive literary “shells” for preserving the teaching. In the Gospels the teaching is found in various aspects – the sayings of Jesus, the doings of Jesus, the theological comments of the Evangelists. Even within the sayings of Jesus there are various types – “I” words, parables, epigrammatic statements, discourses that has to do with life teachings and application and moral instructions.

The diversity of writings refers to the diversity of *leitmotifs* or emphases of the NT books. For instance, in the Johannine writings, the theme of love has particular prominence, while in Hebrews the ideas of priesthood and sacrifice are central. In the Gospels, the diversity of emphases is heightened into different theologies. And each of the gospel writers had different theologies in mind. The theology of suffering is noticed in Mark while theology of commitment is seen in Matthew while theology of salvation is conspicuous in Luke. Then we ask a question whether or not it is right to speak of development of theology with the NT. The idea of progressive revelation is familiar in the OT interpretation and also in the area of the relation of the OT to the NT. The Christian revelation is obviously an advance on the OT revelation. But is there a development of doctrine within the NT? One obvious area that is undeniable is the fact that there is a difference between the Gospels and the rest of the NT. Before the death and resurrection of Jesus the revelation given to the disciples was limited. The

understanding of the person of Christ did not come in a cataclysmic way. It seems rather to have been revealed piecemeal. According to Dunn (235-266), diversity also existed among competing Church groups in early Christian religion. There was a strongly Jewish Christianity associated particularly with Jerusalem; there was a Hellenistic Christianity, often tending to Gnosticism; there was an apocalyptic Christianity with a strong emphasis on an imminent end; and there was eventually, Catholic Christianity. In Acts 6 tensions arose between the two major groups of Jesus movement, the Aramaic Jews and Hellenistic Jews because of the alleged maladministration of the Church's "daily distribution" of food. Seven men were appointed to deal with the problem, and there is a strong suspicion that they were all leaders of the Greek-speaking Christian community, not least because of their Greek names.

That the division between Jewish and Hellenist Christians were not just a practical and cultural matter, but also a theological issue, is suggested by Stephen's speech as reported by Luke. Stephen is remarkably unenthusiastic about the Jerusalem temple, even calling it *Cheiropoiotos* (lit. "hand-made", 6:48; cf. Heb. 9:11, 24), an adjective applied by Jews to pagan idols (e.g.; Is. 31:7; 46:6; Dan. 5:4, 23; 6:27, LXX). Stephen's radical attitude to the temple sets him apart from the apostles and other Christians who seem to have been faithful in their devotion to the temple and leads to ferocious persecution by the Jewish hierarchy. Acts speaks of the Christians generally being forced out of Jerusalem – with the exception of the apostles (8:1). This exception is not explained, but it is suggested that the persecution was in fact directed specifically against the Hellenists and not against the Aramaic – speaking Christians thus the Apostles being Jews were not affected. We thus see a more theological division emerging between a more conservative Jewish Christianity and a more radical Hellenistic Christianity.

The divergence between Jewish and Hellenistic Christianity intensified, especially when the Gentile question of adherence to the Mosaic Law became an important matter of debate. From this point not only Acts but also Paul's letters, in particular Galatians, attest to the sharp divisions of opinion: Paul became the leader of the radical Hellenistic group, denying the importance of adherence to the Jewish Law, even for Jewish Christians; James, the brother of Jesus, became the leader of the Jerusalem Church, and many of the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem are "zealous" adherents of the Jewish Law and are highly antagonistic to Paul's liberal status (Acts 21:18-26). The tension continued to be wagging stronger as time went on.

To recognize that such tensions existed in the early church is not necessarily to recognize diversity in the teaching of the NT. But such diversity has also been identified: Matthew's Gospel and the Epistle of James are thought to represent the conservative Jewish Christian point of view. James has been seen as engaging in deliberate polemic against the Pauline view of justification by faith: Paul argues that Abraham was justified by his faith, not by works of the law; James used the same story to argue exactly the opposite and to insist on the importance of good works (cf. Gal. 3; Rom. 4; and Jas. 2).

For Ladd (689) in contradistinction to Dunn, this thesis of a radical divide between Jewish and Hellenistic Christianity may appear to be contradicted, partially at least, by the evidence of the book of Acts: The author of Acts described sharp conflict in the early Church but he portrayed the apostles, Paul and James – i.e., the leading figures in the Church – as working together and reaching agreement over the controversial issues

(Chs. 15, 21). So, although James with his Jerusalem congregation and Paul with his Gentile mission field have differing emphases and concerns, Luke portrayed them as reaching agreements over controversial issues as they arose.

But this view of things has been seen, in effect, as a Lukan cover up: Writing after the events, Luke wished to emphasize unity and to play down diversity. He did this at the expense of historical accuracy, portraying Paul as far more conciliatory to Jews and Judaizers than he actually was (e.g., Acts 16:3; 21:20-2b) and failing to give any significant mention to the collection that Paul brought to Jerusalem from the Gentile Churches, which was so important to Paul (cf. 1 Cor. 15; 2 Cor. 8 and 9; and Rom. 15 with the allusion in Acts 24:17). As for the collection, it is suggested that Luke was silent about this important Pauline initiative because it was rejected by the Jerusalem Church; Luke did not want to reveal their supremely embarrassing failure of mutual recognition and unity (Dunn 257; Watson 56).

1.1. Diversity of New Testament Theology: Relationship between the Theology of Paul and the Teaching of Jesus

Guthrie (51-52) elucidated three possible ways of approaching the relationship between the theology of Paul and the teaching of Jesus. It has been argued that the pure Christian teaching is that of Jesus and that of Paul was obscured and probably has been corrupted by a Paulinist who came to theologize upon it. Or the opposite has been maintained, in which case Paul's theology provides the key for the understanding of Jesus. The *via media* regarded Paul's teaching as a blossoming out of what was an embryo in the teaching of Jesus. In the first two cases there is a dichotomy in the theology and in third a syntheses.

Furthermore, according to Guthrie, much of the confusion which arose was due to the assumption that whereas Jesus taught in a wholly Jewish environment, Paul was affected by Hellenistic or Gnostic influence. A dichotomy is understandable if it is assumed that Paul has taken the simple gospel of Christ and expressed it in terms of amenable to a non – Jewish cultural background. But there is no doubt that the Hellenizing and Gnostic elements have been grossly exaggerated. The *Religionsgeschichte* School drew a sharp distinction between the confessional beliefs of the Jewish and Hellenistic sections of the early Church and maintained that the NT presentation has been confused as a result. The strong appeal by Bultmann to the Gnostic redeemer myth has maintained the rift, but in any case his rejection of the historical Jesus makes such a cleavage inevitable.

Guthrie (52-53) gave reasons why he adopted the mediating position: Paul's knowledge of the historical Jesus raises the first problem. Throughout his letters, it must be admitted he showed little interest in the historical Jesus. He was simply absorbed with the heavenly Christ. At first sight it might be maintained that Paul was not concerned with the Jesus of history, but he obviously assumed more than he has stated (Fraser 90-102). The death and resurrection of Jesus are central and are, treated as historical events.

The second consideration is the need to define what traditions Paul received about the historical Jesus. That Paul did receive earlier traditions is clear from I Cor. 15:1ff, which is a key passage for appreciating the connection between Paul and the kerygma. Another specific tradition was the Lord's Supper, details of which have

similarly been transmitted to him. He relates this also as a historical fact, specifically referring to the night of betray at Paul was conscious of carrying on what Jesus had inaugurated.

The third consideration is to explain why Paul introduces many concepts which do not occur in the teaching of Jesus. It is evident that no full explanation by Jesus of his mission and death was possible before his death occurred. It cannot be maintained that Paul foisted on to the simpler teaching of Jesus his own complicated dogmatic statements, although it can be held that the germ in Jesus' teaching blossoms into full flower in Paul's theology. What Jesus came to mean for the mind of Paul is not alien to Jesus' own self-testimony, nor to the general early Christian understanding of him. In this matter the more extreme form-critical approach has been confusing, in attributing so much of the teaching of Jesus to the community. "For had this really happened, it is incredible that echoes of the developed Pauline theology would not inadvertently have strayed into the Gospels."

While it is true that Paul was significantly used different terminology and ideas from Jesus, Ladd (705-706) set certain considerations against this observation:

- (1) First, there is not total obscurity in terminology. For example, Paul speaks of the "kingdom of God" occasionally (e.g., I Cor. 6:9, 10; Gal. 5:21). His idea of baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ has no exact parallel in Jesus teaching, but may well have its roots in Jesus' invitation of his disciples "to take up the cross and follow me" and in his reference to his own death as the "baptism" he must undergo (Mk. 8:34; 10:38, 39).
- (2) Even where the terminology is different, the thought may be essentially the same. Paul's use of "righteousness/justification" language in connection with salvation may be have a basis in Jesus' teaching (Mt. 5:20; 6:33; Lk. 18:14).
- (3) The overall structure of Jesus' theology is very similar to that of Paul. In both Jesus and Paul the Good News is that which has begun through Jesus and supremely through his death and resurrection will soon be brought to completion at his return. And in both the call is to faith and discipleship.

2. IS THERE A CENTRE AND A COMMON STRUCTURE FOR NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY?

The question of a centre and a coherent shape of the NT theology are important for two reasons (Ladd 710):

(1) If we can identify a coherent shape and a centre in an author's thought and writing, that will positively help our understanding of the different parts of the author's work. Jesus' uncompromising teaching on divorce, for example, is greatly illuminated when it is seen in the context of his proclamation of the kingdom of God, i.e., his announcement of the new era of divine perfection and love, rather than if it seen merely as strict teaching that goes beyond the strict standards of the Pharisees.

(2) The question of a coherent shape and centre for NT theology is also important because a negative answer, i.e., a conclusion that the theologies of the different New Testament authors have significantly different centres, would undermine

any argument that harmonizes the different strands of the teaching of the early Christian religions. Bultmann sees the harmonization of NT theologies as impossible; the “proclaimer” has become the “proclaimed (Bultmann 33). That sounds as though there was a decisively important theological shift from Jesus, who proclaimed the Kingdom to Paul, and Paul who in turn proclaimed Jesus.

The question of the centre and structure of NT theology is important because it is not easy to answer. If scholars have found it hard even to decide whether there is a centre to the theology of Paul taken on its own, or what the centre is – justification, reconciliation, restoration or “in Christ” – then it must be even harder to identify a centre to NT theology as a whole. The task is complicated particularly by the occasional nature of much of the NT. But despite such complications, despair about the question is not necessary. Although there are difficulties in identifying with certainty the centre of Paul’s theology, it is not difficult to identify a number of things that are central to his thinking.

In addressing the question of the centre of NT theology it must be said that different writings have different *leitmotifs*. In the Johannine writings, for example, the theme of love has particular prominence, while in Hebrews ideas of priesthood and sacrifice are central. But we are still faced with the question whether all the authors are working with the same basic framework of thought and the same core concepts. According to Martin (1) we have to come up with a “synthetic formulation of the Christian message that will be true to as much of the New Testament as a human construction can frame.

1.3 VARIOUS THEOLOGICAL PROPOSALS REGARDING THE CENTRE OF NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

Having established that there is a centre and common structure to NT theology, the followings are a few representative views of scholars of varying theological persuasions.

3.1. Proposal of W. G. Kummel

For Kummel (332), all the three major witnesses of the New Testament: ‘Jesus, Paul, and John know (1) of the imminent coming of the final era of salvation and of the present reality of its fulfillment in Jesus the human being and the risen Lord. But Paul and John are more conscious of the presence of salvation and the expectation of future salvation is less prominent, (2) belief in the condescension of Christ Jesus. Thus in spite of the development of thought exhibited in them, the three major witnesses of the theology of the NT are in agreement in the two-fold message, that God has caused his salvation promised for the end of the world to begin in Jesus Christ, and that in this Christ event God has encountered us and intends to encounter us as the Father who seeks to rescue us from imprisonment in the World and to make us free for active love. Marshall (715) opines that what Kummel established for the three witnesses may be extended to cover all the writers of the NT.

3. 2. Proposal of James D. G. Dunn

Dunn identifies the person of Jesus as the one unifying factor in the diversity of NT theology. The source of NT theology and its reference point is constantly Jesus. Dunn has been heavily criticized for defining the interior unity of the NT so narrowly. But, indeed, he speaks not just of Jesus, but more specifically of

The unity between the historical Jesus and the exalted Christ, that is to say, the conviction that the wandering charismatic preacher from Nazareth had ministered, died and been raised from the dead to bring God and man finally together, the recognition that the divine power through which they now worshipped and were encountered and accepted by God was one and the same person, the man, the Christ, the Son of God, the Lord, the life-giving Spirit (369).

In this description of what is central to the NT Dunn explicitly or implicitly includes convictions about Jesus as preacher-teacher, about his death, resurrection, and exaltation, about his identity as God and Son of God, and about his saving work and the gift of the Spirit.

3. 3. Wenham's Response to Dunn: A Case for Jesus' Mission to the World

According to Wenham (712), Dunn's view is persuasive and helpful, and yet it may be misleading to suggest that the unity of NT theology is very simple or narrowly focused. To try to sum it up in terms of love, or salvation history, or reconciliation, or even Christology is to oversimplify. "Each of those ideas comes very near the heart of NT theology, but none of them says it all." NT theology is indeed focused on Jesus, but Jesus is seen in the context of God's salvific plan for the World. Thus, Wenham (712) sums up Jesus' mission to the world in four categories:

- (1) The Context: God intervened through Jesus to complete his saving purposes through Israel and to reconcile humanity to himself.
- (2) The Centre: Through his life, teaching, death and resurrection, Jesus announced and inaugurated the redemptive rule of God.
- (3) The Community: The believers are called to live as a reconciled community in loving fellowship with God and with each other and to proclaim the Good News to the dying World.
- (4) The Climax: There will be the completion of God's redemptive purposes at the *Parousia*.

Wenham (713) posits that the points enumerated above represents a coherent vision in all the major strands of NT, albeit expressed in diverse ways and with varying emphases. For instance, all the four elements are attested in the kingdom teaching of Jesus in the Synoptics as well as in the Fourth Gospel, in Paul, Hebrews, and elsewhere.

3.4. Donald Guthrie's Basis of Unity in NT theology

Guthrie (54-56) elucidates six major themes as the centre of the NT thought. They are given as: (1) The key figure in the NT is intelligible apart from an understanding of Christ portrayed in it. NT theology is essentially theology about Christ.

“It is for this reason that Christology comes to be the primary doctrine to be considered.” (2) The salvific mission of Christ. All the rich aspect of the NT doctrines of grace and atonement are foundational to an understanding of the unity of the NT (3) The fulfillment motive. All OT predictions about Christ were fulfilled in him. (4) The community idea. The emphasis here is on the Church, the body of believers closely knit together in love and fellowship. (5) The future hope. The thread of eschatological hope runs strongly through the NT is replete with the pervasive activity of the Spirit. “*The NT theology is bound together by the bond of the Spirit.*”

3.5. Marshall and Thielman’s Analysis of the Centre of NT Theology

Marshall (718-726) argues that the basic framework of thought that underlies the NT theology is the “religion of redemption”. Marshall identifies four categories or states common to all writers as: (1) a situation of human need, sin, that places people under divine judgment, (2) a saving act of God accomplished in Jesus Christ, (3) a new life for those who believe mediated by the Holy Spirit, a life that people experience individually and communally, (4) hope for the consummation of all things.

Thielman’s analysis is similar to Marshall’s. He advances that the individual writings of the NT are converged on five major theological issues: (1) the human problem and God’s answer to it in Jesus Christ, (2) faith as God’s initiative, (3) the Spirit as the eschatological dynamic of God, (4) the church as the people of God, and finally (5) the consummation of all things (681-724).

3.6. Ferdinand Hahn’s Centre of NT Theology

Matera (425-426) reviews Hahn’s unified conception of the NT as a synthetic one that employs, as the guiding principle, the *revelation of the one God who created all things and made himself known to humanity and to the world*. Hahn’s divides his second volume *Theologie des Neue Testaments* into five parts, which serve as the centre of the NT theology.

(1) The OT witnesses to God’s action in creation and history as well as to God’s future salvific activity. Adopting the OT as its Bible, the early Church read Israel’s Scriptures in light of God’s action in Christ.” (2) “The Revelatory Act of God in Jesus Christ.” This revelation occurs with the inbreaking rule of God that Jesus proclaimed and realized through his ministry, which then became the basis for the Church’s Christology. (3) “The Soteriological Dimension of God’s Revelatory Act” which deals with the human condition, the problem posed by the law, the redemption of humanity, and the Gospel as the proclamation and realization of salvation. (4) “The Ecclesial Dimension of God’s Revelatory Act”, this involves such themes as discipleship, faith, the nature of the Church, baptism, Eucharist, gifts of the Spirit, ethical life, etc. (5) “The Eschatological Dimension of God’s Revelatory Act” which deals with the future hope of the Christian life.

3.7. Stuhlmacher’s Dogmatic Approach

According to Stuhlmacher, the centre of NT theology could be summarized in six dogmatic statements. Matera (425) highlights the statements as given below:

1. "The chief witnesses of the New Testament *join in confessing the one God, who has definitively revealed himself in his one Son, consubstantial with him, and who has brought about the salvation of the World in him.*"
2. "According to the New Testament the common confession of the one God, who has definitively revealed himself in and through Christ, is connected to the *proclamation of the one apostolic gospel of God about Jesus Christ.*"
3. "*The (major) New Testament witnesses teach in common that the crucifixion of Jesus is to be understood as an atoning death performed for the many in God's commission.*"
4. "*The New Testament writers are in general agreement in seeing in Jesus' resurrection the creative act (which affects all human beings) of the one God, who brings the dead to life, and they are in agreement in teaching the expectation of the parousia and the last judgment.*"
5. "*The individual witnesses of the New Testament join in calling those who believe in Jesus Christ to an exemplary praxis of love of God and neighbor.*"
6. "*According to the unanimous witness of the New Testament the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the one God and his Christ bears and determines the witness, the knowledge of the faith, and the sanctification of the community of Jesus Christ.*"

3.8. Matera's "Master Story" Approach

For Matera (427-478), the unity of the NT theology is grounded in the implied master story to which these writings witness. This story may be summarized as: (1) humanity in need of salvation (soteriology), (2) the Bringer of salvation (Christology) (3) the community of the sanctified (eschatology), (4) the moral life of the sanctified (ethics) and (5) the hope of the sanctified (eschatology). The approach of Matera involves the detailed treatment of these themes in the Synoptic, Pauline, Johannine tradition and other NT voices.

3.9. Analytical Approach of *Redaktionsgeschichte*

The main contention of *Redaktionsgeschichte* is that form criticism, by focusing on the anonymous units of traditions, overlooked the individual contribution of the Evangelists. It has been some gain, for greater attention has been paid to the authors, who had previously been regarded as no more than compilers. But the result of *Redaktionsgeschichte* has been a multiplication of theologies. The basic method of approach is to suppose that each Evangelist selected material from the traditions and sources to give a particular slant to his theological ideas. Thus, for Conzelmann, *Redaktionsgeschichte* heightens distinctive emphases of the Gospels into separate theologies. Kasemann (95-107) also regards the NT as fragmentation and any apparent unity as the result of early catholicizing. The implication is the over-emphasis of the variety of theologies within the NT at the expense of its unity or centre.

This analytical approach of the history of religion which opposes the concept of harmonization of NT theologies has contributed to the "fragmentation of NT theology" (Riensenfeld 39). But harmonization must be allowed for its proper place in the interpreting of NT thought, although any unnatural straining to achieve agreement must be rejected (Guthrie 56).

4.0. THE AUTHOR'S POSITION REGARDING THE CENTRE OF NT THEOLOGY

Apart from Bultmann's *schuler* who reject all possible attempts at determining the interior unity of NT, all the schools of thought have contributed immensely to resolve the difficult question on the common structure of NT theology. Kummel focuses on the eschatological tension of the kingdom of God in the teaching of the NT three major witnesses, viz. Jesus, Paul and John. Dunn centralizes on the unity of the *historische* Jesus and the *geschichtliche* Christ. Wenham posits that Jesus seen in the context of his divine mission to world is the unifying theme of the NT theology. Guthrie proposes Christ, his salvific work, the fulfillment motive, the Church, eschatology and the Holy Spirit as the basis of unity of the NT theology. I. Howard Marshall posits the NT basic framework of thought common to all writers as "religion of redemption", while Thielman presents the centre as converging on *soteriology*, *eschatology*, *ecclesiology*, and *eschatology*. Ferdinand Hahn stresses the motif of the revelation of God in Christ Jesus, while Stuhlmacher proposes six dogmatic statements focusing on God and the Son, one apostolic Gospel, the crucifixion, resurrection of Christ and the Parousia, praxis of love, and Holy Spirit. Finally, Matera's "master story" includes soteriology, Christology, ecclesiology, ethics, and eschatology.

Having carefully examined the strengths and weaknesses of all these scholars, the author of this work resolves to take the position of Donald Guthrie. The centre and coherent shape of the NT theology revolves around Christ (the main figure and reference point) of the NT thought, his redemptive work, the fulfillment of the OT Scriptures in him, the Church, the hope of the believers, and the Holy Spirit. All these themes run profusely through the entire strands of New Testament.

4.1. RELEVANCE FOR LIFE AND MINISTRY

The question of finding a centre for NT theology is beyond academic debate. It has relevance for life and ministry. In this paper, the view of Guthrie is adopted.

- (1) The question of a NT theology's centre enables us to know the major concerns of God for humanity as written in the NT.
- (2) After determining the centre of NT theology, it will be incumbent on the NT preachers to proclaim the very essence of divine revelation. Common to all synthetic models are Christ, his work of redemption, human realization of a need for salvation, the love and fellowship of the believers, the future hope of the saints, the Holy Spirit as the eschatological dynamic of God, etc.
- (3) As the Church proclaims the central truths of the NT biblical revelation, the power of the eschatological Spirit will be made manifested in the Charismatic demonstrations of God's signs and wonders.
- (4) As the centre of the NT theology is determined, the believer must unreservedly resign himself to do the will of the one who is revealed as the reference point of the NT theology.
- (5) The "reconstruction" of the common structure of the NT theology does not mean the isolation of certain truths of NT as the "essential", while discarding the other or dismissing them as "peripheral." All divine truths as embedded in the NT must be known and lived.

CONCLUSION

The author has been able to examine the diversity and common structure of the NT theology as presented by several theological models. Most concur to the fact that there is a centre to the NT thought, while some clearly advances the splintering of the NT theology. But careful NT evidence points to the possibility of determining a centre, around which all other themes revolve. Beyond the academic debate, however, lies the relevance of the NT theology's centre for life and ministry.

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