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A theology of the New Testament

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Reimer writes with enthusiasm and with love of the subject and his approach is contagious. It is a thesis, however, and not a narrative that is easy to read. It requires study, and rewards the effort.

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A Theology of the New Testament

George Eldon Ladd

Revised by Donald A. Hagner

Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993 (1974)

719 pp. + Indices \$34.99 U.S. paper

In view of the erosion of scholarly consensus in biblical studies, the writing of a New Testament theology has become extremely difficult. Many regard it as an impossible undertaking, while others (notably Goppelt, Hubner, and Stuhlmacher) have courageously approached the task anew. Ladd's is the only contemporary comprehensive NT theology by a North American.

In this book the renowned former professor of New Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary does not purport to make an original contribution or to solve difficult problems. He modestly offers *a* (not *the*) NT theology. From a survey of a vast amount of scholarly research (much of it drawn from Kittel's TDNT), Ladd has compiled those scholarly conclusions which seemed most persuasive to him and to others who stand in the tradition of American Evangelicalism. Throughout the book he has attempted to face critical questions openly and to represent fairly the views of those with whom he disagrees.

The book is intended for beginners, primarily for seminary students, and it has been "especially instrumental in helping many fundamentalists to see for the first time not merely the acceptability, but the indispensability, of historical criticism" (p. 19). Since its initial publication in 1974, it has exerted immense influence, especially in conservative circles. Its merits and shortcomings are well known.

The core material has been arranged in six sections: 1) The Synoptic Gospels, 2) The Fourth Gospel, 3) The Primitive Church, 4) Paul, 5) Hebrews and the General Epistles, and 6) The Apocalypse.

Although Ladd asserts that the gospels are both history and theology, he uses the Synoptic Gospels primarily as sources for information about the life and teaching of Jesus, neglecting their own theological contribution, whereas he examines the Fourth Gospel primarily for its theological content.

The discussion of Acts (pp. 347-350) is surprisingly brief. The chief objective here appears to be a defense of the historical accuracy of the

content of Acts, including the speeches. The theology of the Apocalypse, likewise (pp. 669–683), is barely delineated.

The section on Paul (pp. 397–614), by contrast, is very comprehensive, but is marred by a rather trifling handling of the authorship question. According to Ladd, all NT documents have been written by the persons who are traditionally regarded as their authors. Although Ladd acknowledges difficulties in maintaining such a view, he assures the reader that “conservative scholars have not found these difficulties insurmountable” (p. 648). He rarely informs the reader about what those difficulties are and why in his opinion it is safe to make light of them.

Ladd is well aware of the great diversity in the content of the NT. Nevertheless, he insists that a genuine unity pervades the whole. Sometimes it appears that he achieves the impression of such a unity by glossing over some serious tensions in the texts.

Donald Hagner, the editor of the revised edition, holds the G.E. Ladd chair in New Testament at Fuller. He enlisted the help of R.T. France and D. Wenham to remedy two deficiencies which Ladd himself had intended to address before his death in 1980 (delineating the theologies of the Synoptic Gospels [ch. 16] and a more detailed discussion of unity and diversity in the NT [appendix] respectively).

Other improvements of the revised edition include: 1) an essay by Hagner sketching the more recent developments in the discipline, 2) a subject index, 3) the use of more inclusive language, and 4) updated bibliographies which allow the reader to gain information about developments which have taken place since the completion of Ladd’s original edition. In all other respects the revised edition replicates the original, except that in some one dozen places Hagner has added his own brief footnotes to redress certain imbalances in the original text.

In his essay on recent developments in NT theology Hagner observes that several of the newer methods employed in biblical studies (such as reader-response theory, structuralism, and deconstruction), are problematic for the writing of a NT theology. Historical-critical study, he contends, must remain the indispensable basis for the interpretation of biblical documents. NT theology is a “descriptive” discipline, concerned with what the text “meant”. As such it cannot afford to side-step historical questions.

R.T. France has contributed a good summary of the distinctive features of each Synoptic Gospel. He maintains that a NT theology which ignores the theological contributions of each Gospel writer would be incomplete. The pre-Matthean tradition and Matthew’s own interpretation of that tradition constitute “two stages of revelation”, both of them canonical, and each of them an essential part of NT theology (p. 215). France is quick to assert, however, that those who believe in the inspiration of scripture must maintain that the gospel writers are not merely fallible or even tendentious reporters of the words and deeds of Jesus.

Since the task of writing a NT theology is one of relating the various parts to the whole, the diversity of the NT witnesses presents a major

problem. In the Appendix Wenham acknowledges that considerable tension did exist in the early church. He agrees with Dunn that theology was in a state of flux and that "there was not a single worked-out orthodoxy in the New Testament period" (p. 716). He even seems ready to concede that authentic Christian faith can express itself in several different theologies, as redaction-critical studies indicate (p. 686). But he cannot agree with Dunn that "certain New Testament authors deliberately reject the ideas and views of other New Testament authors" (p. 686). To do so would call into question the doctrine of the divine inspiration of scripture. Wenham prefers to think that "the evidence of diversity is far less than has often been suggested" (p. 702).

In this reviewer's opinion Ladd's New Testament Theology is a very valuable resource for the intended audience. The reader would be well advised, however, to make extensive use of the ample bibliographies in order to get a fuller picture of the views which Ladd and his revisers reject. The issues are much more complex than even the much improved revision of Ladd's book suggests. Little wonder that so few scholars attempt to write a New Testament theology! Ladd and his revisers deserve credit and thanks for tackling so momentous a task.

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The New Testament and the People of God

Nicholas T. Wright

Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989

476 pp.

The subject of Christian origins has been a lively academic arena ever since the horrors of the Holocaust shocked theologians into probing what there is in our Christian inheritance that might possibly have contributed to this tragedy.

N.T. Wright has taken upon himself the task of developing "a consistent hypothesis on the origin of Christianity" (p. xiv), and he gallops into this arena with the combativeness of a jousting knight. But Wright is not playing games. The metaphor of warfare is his own choice to describe this debate (p. 3) and it is not fanciful to portray this first volume of a planned five-volume project as a counter-attack, using hand-to-hand combat against most recent scholarship. (The bibliography is 27 pages long!)

In Part I, the author introduces the questions to be addressed: "(1) How did Christianity begin, and why did it take the shape that it did? and (2) What does Christianity believe, and does it make sense?" (p. 10) He then sketches contemporary critical methods in each of the fields of