

THE CHANGING SHAPE OF NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

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BIBLICAL THEOLOGY in general, and New Testament theology as a distinct area of inquiry, emerge only with the rise of historical criticism.¹ Contemporary understanding of the term dates from Philip Gabler's inaugural lecture at the University of Altdorf, March 30, 1787, "Discourse on the Correct Distinction of Biblical and Dogmatic Theology and the Correct Definition of Their Goals." Gabler's distinction reads: "There is truly a biblical theology, of historical origin, conveying what the holy writers felt about divine matters; on the other hand there is a dogmatic theology of didactic origin, teaching what each theologian philosophizes rationally about divine things, according to the measure of his ability or of the times, age, place, sect, school and other similar factors."² Gabler was concerned about current conflicting biblical interpretations and attacked three types of interpretation: the orthodox, who interpreted the Bible only from doctrinal categories; the biblicist-pietists, who were content to repeat biblical formulae; and the rationalists, who imported their own convictions into biblical exegesis.³ He argued that the prime task of a biblical theology is to describe "biblical religion" as embodied in the writers of a given period, to discover consistent themes within this religion, and to organize them systematically. At the same time, he was a child of the Enlightenment in arguing that the Bible offers propositional truths which are valid for all time. Though Gabler did not have the influence in his own time which historians often attribute to him, his proposal anticipated what were to become major concerns of

¹ On its history see H. Boers, *What Is New Testament Theology?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979); G. Hasel, *New Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978); H.-J. Kraus, *Die biblische Theologie: Ihre Geschichte und Problematik* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1970); O. Merk, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments in ihrer Anfangszeit* (Marburg: Elwaert, 1972); H. G. Reventlow, *Problems of Biblical Theology in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986); R. Morgan, *The Nature of New Testament Theology* (London: SCM, 1973); K. H. Schelke, *Theology of the New Testament* 3 (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1976) 18-21.

² Translation from J. Sandys-Wunsch and L. Eldredge, "J. P. Gabler and the Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology: Translation, Commentary, and Discussion of His Originality," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 33 (1980) 137.

³ *Ibid.* 145-46.

biblical theology: the relation of biblical religion to biblical theology; how the conclusions of biblical theology relate to the interpreter's own historical situation; the relation of descriptive and normative statements; and the connection of biblical theology with systematic theology.

In surveying biblical scholarship since the Enlightenment, Robert Morgan and John Barton have argued that scholarly exegesis illustrates Schleiermacher's "eternal covenant" or concordat between secular and rational methods of inquiry, which treat the Bible like any other ancient text, and theological concerns, which relate the Bible to believing communities.⁴ The struggle to maintain this concordat is most vivid in NT theology. Early in this century William Wrede and Adolf Schlatter described what remain as the two poles within which NT theology operates.⁵ Wrede argued vigorously that NT theology is a purely historical discipline, designed to disclose only the religion of the biblical authors. Schlatter, while recognizing the demands and limitations of historical criticism, stressed the normative quality of NT theology by arguing that history itself became the medium of revelation and by postulating a Christological center to the NT writings.⁶ In addition to the tension between purely historical description and normative interpretation, a number of other issues make NT theology a sometimes elusive enterprise. Should the material for this theology be limited to the canonical books, or should it include precanonical and postcanonical traditions?⁷ Within the NT itself is there a center which provides a unifying motif?⁸ Does the term "New Testament theology" mean primarily a description of the theology contained in the NT or a theology done in dialogue with the NT?

Despite the complexity of issues surrounding NT theology and the lack of consensus on either its task or its method, it has been called "the summit, as it were, to which the arduous mountain paths of New Testament exegesis lead, and the vantage point from which one can look back upon them."⁹ NT theology presents a number of paradoxes. Articles

⁴ R. Morgan with J. Barton, *Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1988) 26-33.

⁵ For the translation of Wrede, "The Task and Methods of 'New Testament Theology,'" and Schlatter, "The Theology of the New Testament and Dogmatics," see Morgan, *Nature*.

⁶ R. P. Martin, "New Testament Theology: Impasse and Exit," *Expository Times* 91 (1980) 266-67.

⁷ On "the canon as the context for biblical theology," see B. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970) esp. 99-107. See also his *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985). See T. J. Keegan, *Interpreting the Bible* (New York: Paulist, 1985) 131-44, for a helpful presentation of this approach.

⁸ Hasel, *New Testament Theology* 140-64.

⁹ L. Goppelt, *Theology of the New Testament* 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981) xxv.

multiply on the problems of the discipline; it is routinely pronounced dead. Yet, new journals and series of books emerge dedicated to the study of biblical theology.¹⁰ Comprehensive NT theologies continue to be produced, and monographs appear on particular aspects of NT theology. The Synoptic Gospels, which 40 years ago were viewed as collections of traditional material by rather unskilled editors, are now seen as creative theological statements by evangelists concerned with definite communities.¹¹ Major aspects of Paul's thought, such as his teaching on justification and on the law, have been the subject of renewed debate.¹²

No survey can scan the whole field. By way of a brief glance from the summit to the valleys, I will survey three representative NT theologies of the past half-century, and then conclude with reflections on the changing shape of NT theology in light of social-scientific analysis and literary criticism.

COMPREHENSIVE NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGIES

Surveying a number of theologies produced in the last 40 years, Gerhard Hasel divides them according to approaches that are "thematic" (or descriptive), "existentialist" (Bultmann and his successors), "historical," and "salvation historical."¹³ The majority of NT theologies and the most

¹⁰ See esp. *Horizons in Biblical Theology* (Vol. 1, 1980, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary); *Jahrbuch für biblische Theologie* (Vol 1, 1986, Neukirchener Verlag). Series: *Overtures to Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, since 1976); *Biblische-theologische Studien* (Neukirchener Verlag, since 1977).

¹¹ Helpful surveys are F. Bovon, *Luke the Theologian: Thirty-three Years of Research (1950-83)* (Allison Park, Pa.: Pickwick, 1987); J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke (I-IX)* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1981) 143-270; S. P. Kealy, *Mark's Gospel: A History of Its Interpretation* (New York: Paulist, 1982); J. Kingsbury, *Jesus Christ in Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981); G. Stanton, "The Origin and Purpose of Matthew's Gospel: Matthean Scholarship from 1945-1980," in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, ed. H. Temporini and W. Hase (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1972-) II.25.3 (1984) 1890-1952. Rather paradoxically, research on John, which throughout church history was considered the most "theological" of the Gospels, has concentrated mainly on issues of the community and literary composition of the Gospel. See esp. R. Kysar, *The Fourth Evangelist and His Gospel: An Examination of Contemporary Scholarship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1975); "The Fourth Gospel in Current Research," *Religious Studies Review* 9 (1983) 314-23; J. McPolin, "Studies in the Gospel of John—Some Contemporary Trends," *Irish Biblical Studies* 2 (1980) 3-26; S. Smalley, "Keeping Up with Recent Studies: XII. St. John's Gospel," *Expository Times* 97 (1986) 102-8.

¹² See H. D. Betz, "New Literature on the Authentic Letters of the Apostle Paul," *Journal of Religion* 68 (1988) 186-203; T. Deidun, "Some Recent Attempts at Explaining Paul's Theology," *The Way* 26 (1986) 230-42; O. Merk, "Paulus Forschung, 1936-1985," *Theologische Rundschau* 53 (1988) 1-81.

¹³ *New Testament Theology* 72-139. See also G. Segella, "Quindici anni di teologie del Nuovo Testamento: Una rassegna (1962-77)," *Revista biblica* 27 (1979) 359-95.

significant ones are by Protestant scholars.¹⁴ The work of Max Meinertz published in 1950 is often called the first modern NT theology by a Catholic. Still, almost a half-century after *Divino afflante Spiritu* and 25 years after Vatican II, apart from the studies of Bonsirven and of Schelke, there is no comprehensive NT theology by a Catholic *exegete*, and none even attempted by an English-speaking author.¹⁵

Yet, Catholic *theologians* have engaged the biblical material with insight and vigor, so that the works of Kasper and Schillebeeckx and studies by liberation theologians such as Segundo and Sobrino are in effect Catholic NT theologies, even though not normally classed as such in standard surveys.¹⁶ Rather than duplicate the fine surveys available, I will center on three significant NT theologies which span the last four decades. They all manifest an enduring concern with the "concordat"; all employ the historical-critical method and face the challenge posed by the historical gulf between the first century and ours; yet, each develops a NT theology from a different fundamental perspective which reflects each author's understanding of revelation and determines the structure of the individual works.

Bultmann: Eschatological Event, Proclamation, and Faith

By any standards Rudolf Bultmann ranks as the leading NT theologian of the 20th century. Born in 1884, educated amid the decline of 19th-century liberal theology and during the flowering of the history-of-religions school, and active until shortly before his death in 1976, with publications ranging over six decades, he set the agenda for both critical

¹⁴ H. Conzelmann, *An Outline of the Theology of the New Testament* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969); D. Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Leicester/Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1981); J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology: The Proclamation of Jesus* (New York: Scribner, 1971); W. G. Kümmel, *The Theology of the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977); G. E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974).

¹⁵ J. Bonsirven, *Theology of the New Testament* (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1963; Fr. orig., 1951); M. Meinertz, *Theologie des Neuen Testamentes* (2 vols.; Bonn: Hanstein, 1950). The four-volume work of K. H. Schelke, available in English, by 1973 represents the most ambitious attempt by a Catholic to offer a comprehensive NT theology. Though well informed by exegesis, the organization of the work is similar to a NT handbook of doctrines cast in a systematic mold.

¹⁶ On Schillebeeckx see n. 43 below; W. Kasper, *Jesus the Christ* (New York: Paulist, 1977); H. Küng, *On Being a Christian* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976); J. L. Segundo, *Jesus of Nazareth Yesterday and Today* (3 vols.; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1984-86), see the review and discussion by A. T. Hennelly and M. A. Hewitt, *Religious Studies Review* 15 (1989) 45-51; J. Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1978); *Jesus in Latin America* (ibid., 1987). See also C. Bussmann, *Who Do You Say? Jesus Christ in Latin American Theology* (ibid., 1985).

scholarship and theological reflection.¹⁷ His *Theology of the New Testament*, which began to appear in 1948, was completed by 1953 and quickly translated into English.¹⁸ It caps a long scholarly career and presents a synthesis of his exegesis and of his theology.

In the epilogue Bultmann treats briefly the task of NT theology and the relation between theology and proclamation. Its primary task is "setting forth *the theological thoughts of the New Testament writings*," and assuring that these "*be conceived and explicated as thoughts of faith*, that is: *as thoughts in which faith's understanding of God, the world, and man is unfolding itself*—not as products of free speculation or of a scientific mastering of the problems involved in 'God,' 'the world,' and 'man' carried out by the objectifying kind of thinking."¹⁹ He further states that theological propositions "can never be the *object* of faith; they can be only the *explication* of the understanding which is inherent in faith itself," so that these theological thoughts of the NT can be "normative only insofar as they lead the believer to develop out of his faith an understanding of God, the world, and man in his own concrete situation."²⁰ Bultmann argues that the "understanding which is inherent in faith itself" is shaped by the NT kerygma, so that the task of NT theology is ultimately to describe human existence as determined by God's eschatological activity in Christ.²¹ He concludes this epilogue with the statement that "to make clear this believing self-understanding in its reference to the kerygma is the task of a presentation of NT theology."²²

Bultmann's understanding of the task of NT theology determines the shape of his presentation, often obscured by the division of the work in the English translation into four major parts. In the German original the work is tripartite: Part 1, "Presuppositions and Motifs of a New Testament Theology"; Part 2, "The Theology of Paul and John" (the English translation makes these Parts 2 and 3); and Part 3, "The Development toward the Ancient Church." Attention to the structure shows that for Bultmann "theology" proper is found only in John and Paul. The subdivisions within the discussion of Paul show again Bultmann's understanding of NT theology. First treated is the human condition apart from

¹⁷ R. Bultmann, "Autobiographical Reflections," in *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann*, ed. S. Ogden (New York: Meridian, 1960) 283–88 (until 1956); P. J. Cahill, "The Theological Significance of Rudolf Bultmann," *TS* 38 (1977) 231–36 (biographical data).

¹⁸ R. Bultmann, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1948–53); ET, *Theology of the New Testament* (2 vols.; New York: Scribner, 1951–55).

¹⁹ *Theology* 2.237; italics Bultmann's.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 237–38.

²¹ *Ibid.* 238–39.

²² *Ibid.* 251.

faith, with stress on NT anthropology. This is followed by the human condition under faith, introduced by a section on the "righteousness of God" and followed by treatments of grace, faith, and freedom. To explain the theology of Paul is to be confronted by the same existential challenge which Paul's gospel brought to its original hearers.

Though Bultmann's theology resists neat summary, certain central aspects emerge, many of which were formed as early as 1925 in his essay "The Problem of a Theological Exegesis of the New Testament."²³ Here Bultmann distinguishes *Sachexegesis*, traditional historical exegesis, the identification of what is said and done, from *Sachkritik*, which "comes to what is meant by what is said, and yet measures what is said by what is meant."²⁴ *Sachkritik* means that "the approach to the texts first requires a relation to the subject matter which is appropriate to the way in which the texts present the subject matter."²⁵ The interpreter approaches the NT with all the ambiguities of fragile human existence, which is determined by the kinds of existential decisions he or she makes. The NT both challenges interpreters' self-understandings and offers them possibilities of a new existence responded to in faith and lived under grace. Bultmann thus resists any division between what the text meant and what it means. Any interpretation of the NT which is content with "objectifying thoughts" about God and the human condition is unfaithful to the intention of the NT itself. Other aspects of Bultmann's thought are correlative to the principle of *Sachkritik*. Demythologizing, described by Bultmann as "a hermeneutical procedure that inquires about the reality referred to by mythological statements or texts," enables interpreters to arrive at the real *Sache* of NT thought, not the mythological universe presented but the understanding of existence obscured by this language.²⁶ *Sachkritik* also provides a criterion by which certain parts of the NT are judged theologically important or central to Christian faith.

Bultmann's work has been criticized on a number of grounds, principally his reliance on existentialist philosophy and its consequent individualism and his skepticism about the importance of the historical Jesus for NT theology. For Bultmann the only important thing about Jesus is *das Dass*, the fact "that it is really he who is the messenger of God

²³ In *The Beginnings of Dialectical Theology*, ed. J. M. Robinson (Richmond: John Knox, 1962) 236-56; orig. in *Zwischen den Zeiten* 3 (1925) 334-57. See Cahill, "Theological Significance" 238-40.

²⁴ "Problem" 24; Cahill, "Theological Significance" 238.

²⁵ Cahill, "Theological Significance" 238. See the extensive discussion of *Sachkritik* in Morgan, *Nature* 42-52.

²⁶ R. Bultmann, "The Problem of Demythologizing," *Journal of Religion* 42 (1962) 96.

bringing the final decisive word."²⁷ Details of Jesus' life and teaching form the presupposition rather than the subject of NT theology.

Bultmann combines those elements necessary to an adequate theology of the NT, i.e. solid exegesis of the text, awareness of the historical setting and development of literary traditions, a conscious and philosophically grounded theory of interpretation, and sensitivity to the religious questions of a given age. For almost two decades his work determined the shape and content of NT theology, especially by its influence on the extensive writings of Ernst Käsemann and on the outlines of NT theology by Hans Conzelmann and Eduard Lohse, as well as in works which consciously react against Bultmann's approach and method.²⁸

Cullmann and Goppelt: NT Theology as Witness to Salvation History

Though rooted in the work of the so-called "Erlangen theology" of the 19th century, in the 20th century salvation history is associated with the OT scholar Gerhard von Rad and with Oscar Cullmann in the NT.²⁹ Next to Bultmann's program, salvation history became the most influential theological impulse of the 1950s.³⁰ Though Cullmann never wrote a comprehensive NT theology, in three major works he defended salvation history as the hermeneutical key to NT theology.³¹ Salvation history was one of the leading motifs of the "biblical-theology movement" and had immense influence in Roman Catholicism, especially in religious education.³²

Salvation history is not, as often seems in its popular presentations, a naive interventionist theology which attributes certain historical events to readily discernible divine causality. Cullmann neither identifies salvation history with ordinary historical events nor sees salvation history as a history which develops *alongside* secular history; it evolves *within* it.

²⁷ "The Significance of the Historical Jesus for the Theology of Paul," in *Faith and Understanding* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969) 238, cf. 241.

²⁸ Conzelmann, n. 14 above; E. Lohse, *Grundriss der neutestamentlichen Theologie* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1974). J. A. Fitzmyer follows Bultmann's basic division of material when treating Paul (*Paul and His Theology: A Brief Sketch* [2nd ed.; Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1989] esp. 71-86).

²⁹ Hasel, *New Testament Theology* 115-19.

³⁰ Goppelt, *Theology* 280. In 1962 K. Stendahl called Cullmann "perhaps the most productive contemporary writer in the field of NT theology" ("Biblical Theology, Contemporary," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* 1.421).

³¹ O. Cullmann, *Christ and Time* (rev. ed.; London: SCM, 1962; orig., 1946); *The Christology of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959; orig., 1957); *Salvation in History* (London: SCM, 1967; orig., 1965).

³² M. Boys (*Biblical Interpretation in Religious Education: A Study of the Kerygmatic Era* [Birmingham, Ala.: Religious Education, 1980]) chronicles the impact and decline of this movement.

What distinguishes history from salvation history is the role of revelation in salvation history. Through faith, events are experienced as divine revelation, and revelation enables one to see in historical events the plan of God.³³ To interpret an event as "saving," three things must be distinguished:

first, the naked event [*nackte Ereignis*] to which the prophet must be an eyewitness and which is seen by non-believers as well, who are unable to see any revelation in it; second, the revelation of a divine plan being disclosed in the event to the prophet, with which he aligns himself in faith; third, the creation of an association with earlier salvation-historical revelations imparted to other prophets and the reinterpretations of these revelations.³⁴

Cullmann's position, characterized as "impenetrable" and "tortuous" by one commentator,³⁵ attempts to hold three things in tension: (a) the objective and secular quality of ordinary events in history; (b) the need of revelation to a witness (a prophet or an apostle) for any event to evoke faith, as well as the gratuitous character of faith; and (c) the existence of a "kind of *chain* of salvation-historical insights and revelations" (tradition history), so that the divine plan can be discovered in the unfolding of events.

Distinct understandings of eschatology and Christology flow from Cullmann's view of salvation history. Whereas Bultmann dealt with the eschatological language of the NT by demythologizing it in such a way that the future becomes the existential future faced by the believer in the decision of faith, for Cullmann eschatology is a doctrine about the future and the end of time. In one sense an end has come to salvation history, since in Jesus the promises of the OT have been fulfilled. Yet Jesus, who stood at the turning of the ages, represents also a beginning, so that NT eschatology is a combination of the "already" and the "not yet." The Church lives in the "middle of time," as the final act of God's plan begins to unfold. For Cullmann, Jesus, who had a messianic awareness of being both redemptive servant and Son of Man, saw himself as inaugurating the end time, and the early Church interpreted his resurrection as part of the end-time scenario. The events of the life of Jesus and the action of God in the early Church which are revealed to apostolic witnesses constitute NT salvation history. The function of a NT theology is to redescribe the unfolding of this plan.

Cullmann's program of salvation history has influenced in varying

³³ *Salvation in History* 148–55; Hasel, *Theology* 117.

³⁴ Cullmann, *Salvation in History* 90; Hasel, *Theology* 114.

³⁵ I. Nicol, "Event and Interpretation: Oscar Cullmann's Conception of History," *Theology* 77 (1974) 20.

degrees the subsequent comprehensive theologies of Kümmel and Ladd, and especially the two-volume NT theology by Leonhard Goppelt. More "conservative" in structure and orientation than Bultmann's *Theology*, it is a model of careful historical scholarship and a fine resource for systematic theologians and ethicists in their dialogue with the NT.³⁶ Goppelt aligns himself most closely with those who take a modified salvation-historical approach, especially von Rad and Cullmann, and he thinks that the relationship of the NT to the OT is going to become "a key issue for theology as a whole."³⁷

The first volume, subtitled in the German original "The Ministry of Jesus in Its Theological Significance," manifests his most dramatic departure from Bultmann. Goppelt is well aware of the problems posed by both the old and new quest for the historical Jesus and of beginning a NT theology with the ministry of Jesus. Concretely, he begins with an analysis of the kerygma of 1 Cor 15:1-5 and argues that "the interpretive explication of the Easter kerygma constituted the root of NT theology."³⁸ Unlike Jeremias, he does not offer the words and deeds of the historical Jesus as a basis of theology. In using the Synoptic Gospels as his primary source for the theology of the ministry of Jesus, Goppelt is very much aware that they are influenced by the postresurrection theology of the early Church and the theology of the given evangelists.³⁹ It is not simply the historical ministry of Jesus which is the proper starting point for a NT theology, but the *theological significance* of this ministry as found in the NT itself.

This starting point provides a "Christological center" to Goppelt's theology, and the second volume is organized under the theme "The Variety and Unity of the Apostolic Witness to Christ." Goppelt uses the comprehensive term "Christ event" to describe both the pre-Pauline Christology of the early Church and Paul's Christology, which is expressed in "titles, formulas and brief statements."⁴⁰ In both structure and general approach the second volume is much closer to the work of Bultmann, proceeding from a study of the primitive community, through examination of Hellenistic Christianity, to a study of Paul and the post-

³⁶ In the translator's introduction (1.xv) John Alsup points out that Goppelt's "critique of the so-called theological left, just like that of the right, frequently left him, however, in the difficult theological no-man's-land." Especially helpful in Goppelt's work are the extensive bibliographies to each section, as well as the "literature supplement" (2.315-27) offered by the editors.

³⁷ Goppelt, *Theology* 1.280. Though generally associated with the salvation-history school, Goppelt did not adopt all their positions; see "Translator's Introduction" 1.xv.

³⁸ *Theology* 1.7.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 14.

⁴⁰ *Theology* 2.46.

Pauline writings (arranged according to their historical and religious setting, e.g. James and Matthew as addressed to the Church of Syria, Luke and Hebrews treated together as addressed to communities concerned with the "long path of the church in history"), and concluding with the Johannine writings. In every case he focuses on the distinct understanding of the Christ event offered by a particular book.

While stressing the need for dialogue between theology and exegesis, Goppelt is less consciously hermeneutical than Bultmann or Schillebeeckx. He states his understanding of NT theology somewhat obscurely:

We shall seek to bring the principle of historical-critical scripture research, critique, analogy and correlation, into a critical dialogue with the self-understanding of the New Testament. It would appear to this writer to be fundamental for that self-understanding of the New Testament—without wishing to minimize all the variations in its individual writings—that it wishes to attest to a fulfillment event coming from the God of the Old Testament and having Jesus at its center.⁴¹

He assumes that accurate historical knowledge of the NT will be of relevance to Christian faith and thus that "readers will become participants in the dialogue of research and will be enabled to make their own judgments of the matter."⁴² The self-understanding of NT Christians which is "witnessed" in the Pauline letters becomes implicitly normative for subsequent Christian self-understanding.

Schillebeeckx: Saving Event and Saving Experience as Center of NT Theology

An interesting aspect of post-Vatican II Catholic theology is that systematic theology itself changed by intensive engagement with the NT. This is most evident in the spate of "Jesus books" in the 70s, the culmination of which is Schillebeeckx' massive two-volume work.⁴³ Schillebeeckx merits attention in any survey of NT theology, not because he offers an exegetical-descriptive theology of the NT but because he presents a theological reading of the NT which is fundamentally informed

⁴¹ *Theology* 1.281. Goppelt died before the work was completed, and so he did not have the opportunity, like Bultmann, to add an "epilogue" which details the implications of his descriptive work.

⁴² *Ibid.* 1.xxv.

⁴³ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (New York: Seabury, 1980); *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* (New York: Crossroad, 1983). Schillebeeckx projects a third volume and states: "Perhaps it will be possible to make a beginning on what is called 'christology' after this second volume" (*Christ* 25). For a survey of the 70s, see B. Cooke, "Horizons on Christology in the Seventies," *Horizons* 6 (1979) 193-217; R. Fuller, "The Theology of Jesus or Christology? An Evaluation of the Recent Discussion," *Semeia* 30 (1984) 105-16; G. Sloyan, "Jesus of Nazareth: Today's Way to God," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 17 (1980) 49-56.

by historical criticism of the NT, articulates conscious hermeneutical principles, and in power and scope is the equal of the work of Bultmann and Goppelt.⁴⁴

The volume of reviews, discussion, and criticism of Schillebeeckx' work is a warning against the kind of overly brief evaluation I propose.⁴⁵ The first volume, *Jesus*, offers the first sustained engagement by a Roman Catholic with what have been major issues in Protestant exegesis since the Enlightenment: the relevance of the historical Jesus to Christian faith, the ability to recover the "Jesus tradition," the relation of the tradition so recovered to the post-Easter proclamation, and the abiding significance of NT Christology. One commentator noted, apropos of Schillebeeckx' project, that "the uninvited guest at this feast of wisdom and erudition is Ernst Troeltsch . . . whose central concern emerges here in newly vital form."⁴⁶ This central concern is "that historical relativism poses an even greater challenge to traditional religion than does natural science."⁴⁷

Reading Schillebeeckx is similar to listening to a great symphony. Amid the alternation of contrasting movements, brief intermezzos, and moments of startling beauty, certain major motifs emerge. One such intermezzo in *Christ* summarizes four "formative principles" which shape the two volumes. (1) God is the guarantor of human history, deciding the meaning and purpose of humanity in our favor (a theological and anthropological principle). (2) The person, career, and destiny of Jesus of Nazareth execute and fulfil God's care for humanity and the meaning of human life (Christology). (3) As the history of God has become our history in the man Jesus, so the Christian community remembers Jesus through the practice of becoming his disciples (ecclesiology and pneumatology). (4) Faith promises, though only in fragmentary experience, that final salvation will come (eschatology).⁴⁸ These perspectives are derived from the NT and simultaneously shape our continued appropriation of it.

⁴⁴ "The first message conveyed by what is perhaps the most important work of Christology for many years, is that New Testament theology is too important to be left to the exegetes" (R. Morgan, review of *Jesus* in *Theology* 82 [1979] 457).

⁴⁵ For the controversy surrounding his work, see B. Asen, "Küng, Schillebeeckx and the Magisterium: An Annotated Bibliography," *Theology Digest* 28 (1980) 332-46; T. Schoof, ed., *The Schillebeeckx Case: Official Exchange of Letters and Documents* (New York: Paulist, 1984).

⁴⁶ "Salvation as the Center of Theology," review of Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, by L. O'Donovan, *Interpretation* 36 (1982) 192.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Christ* 629-44; summarized in Edward Schillebeeckx, *Interim Report on the Books Jesus and Christ* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 51-52, and by O'Donovan, "Salvation" 194.

Fundamental to both volumes is Schillebeeckx' stress on experience. In dramatic contrast to the theology of the Word of a Barth or Bultmann, Schillebeeckx writes: "Christianity is not a message which has to be believed, but an experience of faith which becomes a message, and, as an explicit message, seeks to offer a new possibility of life experience to others who hear it from their own experience of life."⁴⁹ Methodologically somewhat resonant of Tillich's method of correlation, Schillebeeckx proposes a "critical correlation" between "the tradition of Christian experience and present day experiences."⁵⁰

Both volumes then probe those fundamental experiences which lie behind the NT texts. These comprise religious and faith experiences of the disciples of Jesus and subsequent early Christian communities. Schillebeeckx distinguishes "experience" from revelation, "the sheer initiative of God's loving experience," but argues that revelation "can, however, only be perceived in and through human experiences."⁵¹ He also rejects a dichotomy between experience and interpretation. "Interpretative identification," he writes, "is already an intrinsic element of the experience itself, first unexpressed and then deliberately reflected on."⁵² In detailing early Christian experience, both the exegesis and argument of *Jesus* are more labyrinthine than in *Christ*, because the historical and hermeneutical questions there discussed are more complex and disputed (e.g., the development and interpretation of the resurrection traditions).

Unlike Bultmann, Schillebeeckx does not renounce the quest for continuity between the pre- and post-Easter Jesus, but locates this continuity in the remembered experience of Jesus, even though this experience is transformed by the resurrection.⁵³ Two elements of Jesus' earthly ministry are foundations of the continuity and of the whole subsequent development of NT theology. First is the *Abba* experience of Jesus, his trusting and intimate sense of the caring presence of God. Second is his proclamation of the kingdom because of which Jesus is remembered as the eschatological prophet, the immediate precursor of the new age who announces God's definitive act of salvation and enacts it in his ministry, especially to the outcasts. This identification of Jesus with the prophet begins in his earthly ministry, which culminates in his

⁴⁹ *Interim Report* 50.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 50–51; Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1951) 59–66. See L. Dupré, "Experience and Interpretation: A Philosophical Reflection on Schillebeeckx' *Jesus* and *Christ*," *TS* 43 (1982) 30–51.

⁵¹ *Interim Report* 11.

⁵² *Ibid.* 13.

⁵³ *Jesus* 312: "there is no gap between Jesus' self-understanding and the Christ proclaimed by the church."

death and resurrection. The offer of salvation and trusting access to God experienced by Jesus' followers during his life is renewed through the proclamation of the Risen One. Behind the canonical Gospels stand four credal modes or "Christologies" (parousia, *theios anēr*, wisdom, and "Easter" or exaltation) which identify Jesus with the eschatological prophet.⁵⁴ The "titular" Christology (Jesus as Lord, Messiah, Son of God) also represents an expression for the post-Easter community of the implications of Jesus' self-understanding as eschatological prophet.

The second volume, *Christ*, subtitled variously in English *The Christian Experience in the Modern World* (British edition) or *The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, rather than properly translating the original Dutch as *Righteousness and Love: Grace and Liberation*, continues to probe early Christian experience and its implications for faith today. It also justifies Schillebeeckx' work being called a NT "theology" and not simply a Christology. Here Schillebeeckx covers a large segment of NT literature: the majority of the Pauline letters (with the somewhat surprising omission of most of 1-2 Corinthians), Ephesians, Hebrews, and the Johannine literature. As in the first volume, an important hermeneutical principle is the correlation between the experience of early Christians and the situation facing believers today. Despite differences in expression and in communities, Schillebeeckx writes: "A fundamentally identical experience underlies the various interpretations to be found throughout the New Testament: all its writings bear witness to the experience of salvation in Jesus from God."⁵⁵ In a wide-ranging engagement with both contemporary problems and contemporary intellectual currents, Schillebeeckx spells out the implication of salvation for today, stressing that a salvation offered today which is faithful to the experience of grace among early Christians must affect the social and political realms of human life.

Schillebeeckx' still uncompleted project, which he himself has never claimed to be a "theology of the New Testament" but rather a prolegomenon to a systematic theology, not only represents a major achievement in itself but also is the closest thing to a NT theology produced by a Catholic. While exegetical problems attend Schillebeeckx' work, they do not invalidate either his basic exegetical-theological method or the overarching vision of the NT which he offers.⁵⁶ An often-cited problem

⁵⁴ *Jesus* 440; see also John Nijenhuis, "Christology without Jesus of Nazareth Is Ideology: A Monumental Work by Schillebeeckx on Jesus," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 17 (1980) 133.

⁵⁵ *Christ* 463.

⁵⁶ In commenting on the "exegetical infelicities in a theological work of awe-inspiring scope," Raymond Brown (*Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 42 [1980] 421) suggested that Schil-

is that he frequently rests aspects of his argument on certain problematic exegetical foundations, such as the tradition history of the Q material and the nature of the Q community, the existence of a pre-Christian expectation of a messianic eschatological prophet, the existence of a *theios anēr* Christology, and his interpretation of the "appearance" narratives.⁵⁷ Even in *Christ*, where there are far fewer problems of exegetical detail, many contemporary Pauline scholars would argue that Schillebeeckx has not given enough attention to the specific historical and social context of Paul's statements, nor to the literary and rhetorical structure of given letters.⁵⁸

SHIFTS IN METHOD AND NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

The three comprehensive NT theologies examined in some detail share a common historical-critical approach to the NT, though they adapt it differently. Each is concerned with historical understandings of terms, the age and development of specific traditions, the original setting and meaning of NT books. While such a method will always be both a foundation and an integral part of any NT theology, it has been supplemented in the past two decades by two approaches which will become increasingly important for NT theology but have not yet determined the shape of any comprehensive work. I am referring, first, to the renewed and reformulated dialogue between social sciences and NT studies, and, second, to the "literary turn" in biblical studies, which itself involves a complex of approaches which I will sketch below. In both scope and quantity of publications, social-scientific and literary-critical approaches have become virtual subdisciplines in biblical studies. Since each is treated extensively elsewhere in this issue, I will simply highlight some implications of these methods for NT theology.⁵⁹

Social-Scientific Methods

"Social-scientific methods" is an umbrella phrase for a host of emergent subdisciplines: study of social facts in early Christian texts, social history involving "political history and theology within an informed theoretical

lebeekx might have better submitted his work prior to publication to "major exegetes of different background for substantial comment."

⁵⁷ See esp. the reviews by R. E. Brown, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 42 (1980) 420-23; J. P. Galvin, *Heythrop Journal* 21 (1980) 185-88; G. O'Collins, *Gregorianum* 61 (1980) 372-76.

⁵⁸ On the challenge posed by a "contextual" reading of Paul, see R. Scroggs, "Can New Testament Theology Be Saved? The Threat of Contextualisms," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 42 (1988) 17-31.

⁵⁹ The first history of scholarship to treat these methods extensively is Morgan and Barton, *Biblical Interpretation* 133-66, 203-68.

framework," study of social organization, forces, and institutions, and probing of the social world—"what it felt like to live in a world described by the symbols, rituals, and language of early Christianity."⁶⁰ In recent years the methods have been broadened and enriched to include considerations from cultural anthropology.⁶¹ John Elliott assesses the achievements of social-scientific study of the Bible as follows:

It has stretched our personal and scientific horizons, alerted us to the limitations of our received exegetical wisdom, sharpened our perception and deepened our understanding of early Christian texts as media of social interaction. It has developed our awareness of behavioral patterns, pivotal values, social structures, cultural scripts and social processes of the biblical world, the world within which and from which our sacred traditions draw their vitality.⁶²

This description shows clearly the value of these methods for disclosing "the world within which and from which" the biblical texts emerged. They also enable interpreters to speak more concretely about early Christian "experience." We have seen how important the Christian experience is to Schillebeeckx' whole project. Yet, paradoxically, his description of this experience, when formulated in what Schillebeeckx has called "second order" affirmations (in contrast to the original interpretive experience expressed in "first order" affirmations), remains somewhat abstract and is uprooted from its social context. Emerging social-science methods enable contemporary interpreters to describe the experiences of early Christians with more awareness of their social and anthropological contexts and to give more concrete shape to just how different communities "experienced" salvation and grace.

Literary Criticism and NT Theology

The literary turn in biblical studies is part of a larger revolution in both theology and the humanities described by Werner Kelber as a "shift from a referential to a formalist model, from theological categories to narratological apparatus, from extra-textual standards of correctness to fictional purpose and from meaning-as-reference to meaning-as-narrative."⁶³ In contrast to the historical-critical method and to social-scientific methods, which disclose primarily "the world behind the text," these

⁶⁰ Jonathan Smith, "The Social Description of Early Christianity," *Religious Studies Review* 1 (1975) 19-25.

⁶¹ See esp. the work of B. Malina, *Christian Origins and Cultural Anthropology* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1986); *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (ibid., 1981).

⁶² J. H. Elliott, "Social-Scientific Criticism of the New Testament: More on Methods and Models," *Semeia* 35 (1986) 2-3.

⁶³ "Gospel Narrative and Critical Theory," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 18 (1988) 131.

methods address "the world of the text" and "the world in front of the text."

The application of nonbiblical literary-critical methods to biblical texts results in two different (but often overlapping) approaches. First are those approaches, rooted in the New Criticism, which call attention to the nature and autonomy of language and "the world of the text." These involve principally study of the imaginative and symbolic quality of biblical language, structuralism, and "narrative criticism" (including, e.g., studies of narrator, character, setting, plot, and point of view) along with "narratology" (the theory of how narrative achieves its effects).⁶⁴ The second aspect of the literary turn examines "how language works" and focuses on different aspects of language as communication involving a "message" sent by an author (or speaker) to a recipient in a definite medium involving distinct codes and contexts. It has links with the "new rhetoric" with its conscious attention to the manner in which the readers or recipients of a text determine the shape of its message.⁶⁵ Closely related to the new rhetorical criticism are "reader response" criticism and its cousin "reception theory," which study the way individuals or "interpretive communities" over a given period of time give meaning to a text.⁶⁶

One of the pioneers in accenting the need to attend to the literary quality of biblical language was Amos Wilder, who voiced a "continuing conviction that both scholars and general readers have failed to do justice to what one can call the operations of the imagination in the Scriptures—to the poetry, the imagery and the symbolism."⁶⁷ He attributed this

⁶⁴ The literature is vast. Helpful introductions are Keegan, *Interpreting the Bible*; E. V. McKnight, *The Bible and the Reader: An Introduction to Literary Criticism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985); *Meaning in Texts: The Historical Shaping of a Narrative Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978). Helpful for the often confusing terminology are M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (5th ed.; New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1988), and O. Ducrot and T. Todorov, *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Sciences of Language* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1979). Also helpful are F. Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1980), and W. Martin, *Recent Theories of Narrative* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, 1986) esp. 15–31.

⁶⁵ On the "new rhetoric," see T. Sloan and C. Perelman, "Rhetoric," *New Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th ed. (1987) Vol. 26, 803–10, and C. Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1969).

⁶⁶ For an overview see McKnight, *Bible* 75–82; Abrams, *Glossary* 231–37. The leading figure in this approach is W. Iser, *The Implied Reader* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1974). See also the essays in J. P. Tompkins, *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1980). For application to a biblical text, see R. Fowler, *Loaves and Fishes: The Function of the Feeding Stories in the Gospel of Mark* (Chico, Cal.: Scholars, 1981) esp. 149–79.

⁶⁷ *Jesus' Parables and the War of Myths* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 15.

failure to an "occupational cramp" due to a philological interest in minutiae which reduced poetry to prose and to a theological tradition which was interested in ideas.⁶⁸ Over the last two decades Wilder's challenge was most dramatically taken up in study of the language of Jesus, especially the parables.⁶⁹ The parabolic language of Jesus, explored under the aegis of "metaphor," then became a paradigm for theological language about Jesus. For example, both Leander Keck and Schillebeeckx call Jesus "the parable of God."⁷⁰ Norman Perrin extended the discussion beyond the parables and argued that terms like "kingdom of God" and "Son of Man" should not be seen as "concepts" but as "tensive symbols" which evoke a whole range of associations in the history and life of a people.⁷¹ Moving beyond biblical exegesis, Sallie McFague has argued that "*metaphorical theology* is indigenous to Christianity, not just in the sense that it is permitted, but is called for."⁷² The major contribution to "theology" from these studies has been to move NT theology away from preoccupation with doctrine and history to engagement with the symbols in which early Christianity expressed its faith.

Along with the symbols and images of the Bible, its narratives and narrative quality have been extensively studied with a stress on "how narrative works" and what it means that biblical revelation is in narrative form. Centering in the NT (not surprisingly, the Gospels and Acts), such studies focus on the "world of the narrative" and examine it in terms of the characters, settings, plot, and perspective offered by the story itself. This has led to the production of "narrative theologies," especially of the Gospels.⁷³ Narrative theology, which has blossomed in both theology and biblical studies in the past two decades, is described by Gabriel Fackre as "discourse about God in the setting of story." He notes that "narrative becomes the decisive image for understanding and interpreting faith," and divides narrative theologies into "canonical story, life story and

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ For survey of parable research, see J. R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable: Metaphor, Narrative, and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 4-27; N. Perrin, *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom* (ibid., 1976) 89-205.

⁷⁰ L. Keck, *A Future for the Historical Jesus* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971) 243; Schillebeeckx, *Jesus* 116.

⁷¹ Perrin, *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom* 29-30.

⁷² S. McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 14.

⁷³ Representative studies are A. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), noteworthy for clear exposition of nonbiblical literary categories; J. Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story* (rev. ed.; ibid., 1988); D. Rhoads and D. Michie, *Mark as Story* (ibid., 1982); R. C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation* 1 (ibid., 1986).

community story.”⁷⁴ Rejecting any radical distinction between form and content, narrative theology would argue that the *way* the story is told and the way readers are drawn into the story is a definite way of speaking of God (therefore a theology). It reflects the prime biblical mode of recital and resonates with human existence, which unfolds in time as a story.⁷⁵

Narrative criticism also calls into question the way in which NT theology has been conducted. For example, one of the paradoxes of Schillebeeckx' project is that, though the title of the Dutch original of *Jesus* is “The Story (*Het verhaal*) of Someone Living,” and though he frequently speaks of the “story” of Jesus, he gives little attention to the distinctive narrative expression of this story in the Gospels. The Gospels, for Schillebeeckx, remain sources which are to be mined in his reconstruction of the story of Jesus. Contemporary Gospel criticism would argue that equally important is the presentation of this story in four distinct ways by the evangelists. Narrative analysis, issuing in a genuine narrative theology of the Gospels and Acts, must be a necessary part of any NT theology.

Among the complexes of subdisciplines making up the literary turn in biblical studies, I propose that it is principally “rhetorical criticism” as understood by practitioners of “the new rhetoric” which offers an important resource for NT theology.⁷⁶ This approach seeks to uncover the “rhetorical strategy” and “rhetorical situation” of a given text. The method proceeds from the world of the text to the “world in front of the text” and uncovers the power of the text to persuade, convince, or move its original readers and also paints a tableau of these readers.

Such rhetorical criticism as embodied in the work of Vernon Robbins, Norman Petersen, and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, to mention only some examples, integrates literary criticism and social analysis.⁷⁷ Literary criticism discloses the narrative structure and symbolic world of the text, and social analysis uncovers the world out of which the text emerges and

⁷⁴ G. Fackre, “Narrative Theology: An Overview,” *Interpretation* 37 (1983) 343.

⁷⁵ See S. Crites, “The Narrative Quality of Experience,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39 (1971) 291–311; A. Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric: The Language of the Gospel* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1971) 56–57.

⁷⁶ A helpful overview is W. Wuellner, “Where Is Rhetorical Criticism Taking Us?” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 49 (1987) 448–63.

⁷⁷ V. Robbins, *Jesus the Teacher: A Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation of Mark* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); N. Petersen, *Rediscovering Paul: Philemon and the Sociology of Paul's Narrative World* (ibid., 1985); E. Schüssler Fiorenza, “The Followers of the Lamb: Visionary Rhetoric and Social-Political Situation,” in *Discipleship in the New Testament*, ed. F. Segovia (ibid., 1985) 144–65; “Rhetorical Situation and Historical Reconstruction in 1 Corinthians,” *New Testament Studies* 33 (1987) 386–403.

for which it is produced.⁷⁸ Schüssler Fiorenza presents a concise and systematic exposition of the task and method of rhetorical criticism.⁷⁹ She describes four stages interpreters move through as they attempt to assess the rhetorical situation and strategy of a given document: (1) identification of the rhetorical interests and models of contemporary interpretation; (2) delineation of the rhetorical arrangement, interests, and modifications introduced by the author; (3) elucidation and establishment of the rhetorical situation of the document; and (4) reconstruction of the common historical situation and symbolic universe of the writer/speaker and the recipient/audience. Concretely, rhetorical criticism would enable an author like Schillebeeckx or anyone else who wishes to discuss the "experience of grace" in Paul to be more precise about what this experience meant to specific communities in terms of the problems existing in their situation.

Rhetorical criticism integrates study of the symbolic and narrative worlds of the Bible. It is also helpful in examining how a text is the medium of communication in a particular social context.⁸⁰ Even the Gospels, which are not as evidently "rhetorical" as Paul's letters, contain a "narrative rhetoric" where "the narrator constructs a narrative world which readers are invited to inhabit imaginatively, a world constructed according to certain values and beliefs."⁸¹ The preface to Luke's Gospel articulates a clear rhetorical purpose: "so that you may realize the certainty of the teachings you have received" (Lk 1:4 NAB), while the calls for faith and conversion along with exhortation to fidelity in other Gospels show that their purpose is radically rhetorical: to move the audience to take a position envisioned by the author.⁸²

CONCLUSION

A survey of selected comprehensive NT theologies and comments on the challenge posed by new methods of exegesis suggest a few guidelines for thinking about the task of NT theology.

First, historical-critical studies of the language, historical events, and

⁷⁸ For a recent integration of these two methods in study of the Gospels, see S. Freyne, *Galilee, Jesus, and the Gospels: Literary Approaches and Historical Investigations* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) esp. 6–13 (on method).

⁷⁹ "Rhetorical Situation" 388–89.

⁸⁰ The seminal essay for a "communications model" is R. Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style in Narrative*, ed. T. A. Sebeok (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T., 1960) 350–77. A clear adaptation of this can be found in R. Scholes, *Semiotics and Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University, 1982) 17–36.

⁸¹ Tannehill, *Narrative Unity* 8.

⁸² For studies of the Gospels according to the typologies of classical rhetoric, see G. A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1984).

cultural settings of biblical books will always remain essential to NT theology, as they will to any attempt to attribute "meaning" to an ancient text. Yet the distinction between biblical theology as a "descriptive" rather than a "normative" discipline, expressed in Krister Stendahl's oft-quoted distinction between what the Bible "meant" and what it "means," while helpful in describing stages of exegesis, creates an artificial division between description and interpretation.⁸³ Nor is it even an accurate characterization of the descriptive task of NT theology. Every description involves choice and selection, which are elements of interpretation; every description, however objectively carried on, reflects the situation of the interpreter, and neutrality is foreign to texts which advocate clear positions and summon to full commitment.

Second, biblical theology presupposes some prior judgment on how the Bible is revelatory.⁸⁴ David Kelsey has argued that any theory of how Scripture is authoritative presupposes a "discrimen."⁸⁵ This is a "logically prior imaginative judgment about how best to construe the mode of God's presence, . . . a prior decision about what it is to be a Christian."⁸⁶ If a given author sees revelation primarily in terms of the "revealed Word of God" or in propositional terms, his or her "theology" will normally be cast in a doctrinal mode. Those who see God's self-disclosure primarily in history will interpret the NT in terms of a salvation-history schema, often relating the OT and NT in terms of promise and fulfilment. Authors who stress human experience as the source of theology attempt to get behind the literary evidence to the lived experience of early Christian communities.⁸⁷ Feminist hermeneutics, as carefully outlined by Schüssler Fiorenza, takes this approach in juxtaposing the liberating praxis of Jesus and early Pauline communities with the patriarchal restrictions of the

⁸³ Stendahl, "Biblical Theology," esp. 421–28. James Barr (*Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Supplementary Volume* 106) suggests that Stendahl's proposal was in reaction to the then dominant "biblical theology movement," which minimized the radical difference between the world of the Bible and contemporary culture. For cogent criticisms of Stendahl, see A. Dulles, "Response to Krister Stendahl's Method in Theology," in J. P. Hyatt, ed., *The Bible in Modern Scholarship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1965) 210–16, and B. C. Ollenburger, "What Krister Stendahl 'Meant'—A Normative Critique of 'Descriptive Biblical Theology,'" *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 8 (1986) 61–98.

⁸⁴ On what follows see esp. A. Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983).

⁸⁵ *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) esp. 166–70.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 166.

⁸⁷ This admittedly raises the problem of the authority of the canon versus the authority of traditions and experience underlying the canon; see R. E. Brown, "The Gospel of Peter and Canonical Gospel Priority," *New Testament Studies* 33 (1987) 321–43, for reservations about this approach.

NT texts.⁸⁸ Similarly, liberation theologians invoke Jesus' "good news to the poor" in proclamation and in action as normative for Christian faith.⁸⁹ Authors who understand revelation under the general aegis of symbolic or metaphorical language about God are drawn to the concrete images and stories of the NT and propose a metaphorical or narrative theology.

Finally, NT theology must be aware of the shifting trends within theology itself. In theological use of the NT the doctrinal paradigm has been dominant, not in the earlier, somewhat crass "proof-texting" mode, but in more subtle ways. The continued production of dictionaries of biblical theology organized around key terms reflects a doctrinal model. The illustrative use of Scripture in many church documents is another variation of the doctrinal mode. Two of the emerging methods in NT studies—social-science analysis and literary criticism—correspond to changes of paradigms within theology itself. Over a broad spectrum contemporary theology views itself more and more as reflection upon experience rather than as systematic reflection upon "revealed truth" which can be summarized in propositions.⁹⁰ Both the experience behind its expression in language and the way in which language itself functions are important for theology. Now, e.g., systematic theologians and ethicists turn to narrative as a source of their reflections.⁹¹ Contemporary theology is also "hermeneutical" and deeply engaged with the linguistic revolution.⁹² The marriage of nonbiblical literary criticism to traditional exegesis is a manifestation of this same revolution.

While new methods and new paradigms present a continuing challenge to biblical theology, the challenge can be ignored. A negative aspect of the linguistic turn mentioned above is "an intense skepticism about the

⁸⁸ *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983) esp. 1–67; *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1984).

⁸⁹ See esp. the new introduction to G. Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988) xvii–xlv; J. L. Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology* (ibid., 1976); A. T. Hennelly, "The Biblical Hermeneutics of Juan Luis Segundo," in *The Use of Scripture in Moral Theology*, ed. C. Curran and R. McCormick (New York: Paulist, 1984) 303–20.

⁹⁰ W. J. Hill, "Theology," in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. J. Komonchak, M. Collins, and D. Lane (Wilmington, Del.: Glazier, 1987) 1012.

⁹¹ On ethics see the fine summary by W. Spohn, *What Are They Saying about Scripture and Ethics?* (New York: Paulist, 1984) 89–105.

⁹² On the implications of this for exegesis, see S. Schneiders, "From Exegesis to Hermeneutics: The Problem of the Contemporary Meaning of Scripture," *Horizons* 8 (1981) 23–39, and "The Paschal Imagination: Objectivity and Subjectivity in New Testament Interpretation," *TS* 43 (1982) 52–68.

relationship between language and reality.”⁹³ Narrative analysis can devolve into a formalism concerned only with the autonomous world of the text and forsake any quest for those meanings behind or in front of the text. Social-science methods can devolve into a new form of historical archaism which is interested only in the world behind or in front of the ancient text. Rhetorical criticism is challenged to move from the rhetorical situation of the first readers to address the world in front of the text of the contemporary reader. If the Bible is to remain as the classic expression of Judeo-Christian religious faith, methods of interpretation must, as David Tracy reminds us, disclose the religious event which stands in front of the texts. Their religious power and not simply their aesthetic appeal or cultural fascination must be the proper subject of NT theology.⁹⁴ This religious power is available to us only through the language of the NT texts, which reflect the complex and deep religious experience of early Christians. Literary-critical and social-scientific methods, especially when combined in a rhetorical paradigm, can disclose the religious power of these texts along with that experience which is foundational and paradigmatic for Christian existence and is the basis of theological reflection.

Since biblical theology has always been the child of the marriage of reigning exegetical methods to theological questions of a given period, there is every hope that today's emerging methods and shifting paradigms will be the parents of tomorrow's comprehensive NT theologies.

⁹³ P. R. Keifert, "Interpretive Paradigms: A Proposal concerning New Testament Christology," *Semeia* 30 (1985) 202.

⁹⁴ D. Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 259, 281.