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NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY—SOME PROBLEMS AND PRINCIPLES

New Testament theology as a distinct branch of biblical studies or of theology in general is still a youthful discipline. Whether we trace its emergence to the nineteenth century or to the early twentieth, it is clear that Catholic biblical scholars in particular had not attempted to produce genuine theologies of the New Testament until less than forty years ago. And only some half dozen of those available properly merit the title.¹ The present reflections are prompted by the very recent appearance of several Catholic works of or about the theology of the New Testament: the long-delayed English translation of the *Theology of the New Testament* by the late Père Bonsirven,² a new popular and original book by Q. Quesnell, S.J.,³ and especially the programmatic study of the subject by R. Schnackenburg.⁴

Despite the relative paucity of works on this topic, the phrase 'biblical theology' has won a solid place in the jargon of theology, and like many quasi-technical terms that enjoy wide popularity, it is subject to a broad range of meanings. In a legitimate sense all Christian theology since New Testament times is 'biblical theology' inasmuch as the Bible is its indispensable and privileged source-book. And every true theologian from Clement of Rome to Hans Küng is in this sense a biblical theologian. But this is clearly not the sense in which the term is currently used. Moreover, there were Christian theologies even

¹ The very useful multi-volume *Theologia biblica* of F. C. Ceuppens, O.P. (Rome, 1938), for example, is really a compendium of biblical references to the themes of dogmatic theology. By 'New Testament theologies' here we mean works that attempt to set forth comprehensively the theological ideas of the New Testament, not the many works that treat of the theology of individual writers or books or of individual themes present in the New Testament.

² Trans. S. F. L. Tye (London: Burns and Oates, 1963). The French original appeared in 1951.

³ *This Good News. An Introduction to the Catholic Theology of the New Testament* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Bruce, 1964).

⁴ *New Testament Theology Today*, trans. D. Askew (London: Chapman, 1963), first published in French in 1961. For many of the viewpoints expressed in the present article we are indebted to this book.

before the New Testament was written and this fact will appear as a complication in the effort to set forth the theology of the New Testament itself. For these are what 'New Testament theology' tries to recover: the various strata of theology that evolved in the primitive Christian Church and were set down—unsystematically—in the New Testament.

A working definition

In the past decade or more, literally dozens of biblical scholars have discussed the precise nature of biblical theology and attempted to define it and its relationship to other branches of the theological 'family.' It is our intention here to cut through the differences and controversies about the meaning of the term 'New Testament theology' and try to shed light on its nature by seeing some of the problems it has to face. Instructive though it might be, we must renounce sketching the history of this type of theology or analysing the opinions of others and instead concentrate on the materials with which the New Testament theologian works. This does not dispense us from offering a provisional definition of the subject, however, at least a minimal one that will serve to introduce the problems. We may therefore take New Testament theology to be a systematic effort to understand the revelation made in Jesus Christ in the terms in which the apostolic Church understood it.

The apostolic Church's understanding of revelation is of course reflected in the New Testament and thus the sole legitimate source for this investigation must be the New Testament.¹ We must leave out of account all the other sources, even the most ancient ones, in which the traditions of the early Church are recorded. This limitation is not as obvious as it might seem, for not all 'biblical' theologians in the past have accepted it.

The New Testament theologian's work will be systematic insofar as the study of theology is a scientific study. But it is of primary importance to note that his effort is not to impose a later theological system, whether conciliar or scholastic or existential or any other, upon the New Testament materials, but rather to discover in them the systems, however rudimentary, that underlie the various statements made there. The Gospels, Acts, Epistles and Apocalypse are clearly not systematic theological treatises; they are on the contrary sometimes almost occasional writings composed to fit the needs of a specific time and mentality, and the effort required to understand them properly is a good indication of how much their time and mentality differ from ours. But if the New Testament theologian is to do anything more than

¹ cf. Bonsirven, p. xvi

rephrase the contents of the books, he will try to uncover the theology present in them and order it according to a central principle of unity and a set of subordinate principles. And in so doing he will also discover something of the timeless, or at least perennial, value of the biblical revelation that is reflected in its renewed appeal to our own age.

Implicit in this working definition of New Testament theology is a confrontation that has occasioned many a divergent view on the part of contemporary theologians. That is the fact that we must attempt to understand revelation in the terms in which the early Church understood it, but inevitably using our own twentieth-century intellectual equipment. It is virtually impossible for us to understand the Good News of salvation precisely and only as the earliest theologians understood it. Moreover, it is useless to try to do so, for that would mean on the one hand merely rearranging the words of the Bible—a procedure of dubious value but by no means unheard of: some 'fundamentalist' writers confine their theological vocabulary strictly to that of the Authorised Version—and on the other hand we should thus be renouncing or at least suspending the unceasing growth in theological understanding which is a mark of the Holy Spirit at work in the Church. But clearly we must draw the line: the language of Origen or of St Thomas or of Karl Rahner is not simply the language of Paul or John or Mark. To what extent, therefore, is it legitimate to introduce philosophical systems or categories and later theological vocabulary into the exposition of New Testament theology? Though it may sound over-simplified and unsatisfactory, the only criterion that seems valid and acceptable is the measure of common sense. The effort to set forth a faithful and to our own day meaningful account of the theology of the early Church will necessarily involve some interpretation using the tools of subsequent thought, and the measure or type of intrusion will be one of the personal marks of different New Testament theologians. But common sense will have to judge that what is recognisably a work of Thomistic or Calvinist or existentialist theology is no longer a biblical theology.

A case in point that deserves brief mention here is the question of so-called 'functional' theology or Christology.¹ It is true that in the New Testament the person of Christ is inseparable from his work of revealing the salvation wrought by God in the world. And it is also true that the New Testament itself does not speculate upon the person or the natures of Christ. The New Testament Christology is functional rather than ontological. But is it permissible to elevate this *fact* about the New Testament into a *principle* that must not be violated? The

¹ cf. Schnackenburg, pp. 118-19

eminent biblical scholar Oscar Cullmann seems to do just this when he declares all speculation about the natures of Christ to be not only foreign to the New Testament but contrary to it, a betrayal of it. This is a denial of the very real continuity between New Testament theology and the developing theology of the Church, and it is also a repudiation of part of the natural role of the biblical theologian. Some non-functional, ontological thinking can be shown to be implicit in the New Testament itself—not of course the precise formulations of the Council of Chalcedon, but a rudimentary awareness of the unique personality of Christ as a reality more substantial than a mode of being. The modern theologian who is far better equipped in the light of subsequent doctrinal development to understand such subtle thought does not prove unfaithful to the New Testament if he allows his understanding some play in his exposition of the New Testament Christology.¹

The one and the many in New Testament theology

Several of the problems of a New Testament theology may be seen as manifestations of the perennial scientific problem of the one and the many. The unity of New Testament theology exists only in the midst of a manifold diversity, and the systematiser must seek to recognise and accept the diversity where it exists and to discover the principle of unity when there is one. Three different types of diversity within the New Testament may affect the work of the theologian: there are different levels in the development of theology within the New Testament itself; there are different authors in it who understand and formulate revelation differently; and there are different theological themes that underlie the whole current of its theology.

The first of these problems is in its present form a relatively new one because theologians have been made conscious of it largely by the work of form-criticism and even more recently redaction-criticism. There is an ever more general awareness that the message of salvation revealed in and by Jesus Christ is presented to us in the New Testament in the theological interpretations of the New Testament writers or of the primitive Church. The New Testament is itself, so to speak, a blending of theology and the object of theology, which is revelation, and we must understand the elements of this blending process separately in order fully to understand them together as the inspired word of God. This distinction is not intended to imply that what is recognised as

¹ The best discussion of this particular problem known to the writer is that of L. Malevez, S.J., 'Nouveau Testament et théologie fonctionnelle,' *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 48 (1960), pp. 258–90. See also Quesnell, pp. 132–9, on the relationship of dogma to New Testament theology.

theological interpretation in the New Testament, that is in some cases as redactional or as moulded by the life of the Church, ceases to be regarded as normative for present-day faith. The whole is Scripture and the whole is the scriptural source of Christian teaching. The Church has never held that everything in the Bible is by that very fact revelation.

Examples of these levels of theological development come readily to mind : one has only to consider the discourses of Jesus as reported in the Fourth Gospel, the kerygmatic sermon outlines preserved in Acts, or St Paul's frequent use of credal, liturgical and kerygmatic elements in his Epistles.¹

In the Gospels there is an especially vivid panorama, though not an easy one to discern, of the various levels of presentation of the material about Jesus Christ and his teaching. It is not uncommon today to speak of three such levels.² To avoid the somewhat cumbersome German *Sitz-in-Leben* terminology, we may label these strains as follows : the 'historical' level, the barest account of what Jesus said and did ; the 'kerygmatic' level, the earliest tradition of the Church containing its proclamation of the message about Jesus ; and the 'evangelical' level, the way in which the individual Evangelists used and reflected upon the materials at hand. Theoretically one could speak of a theology on each of these three levels : the 'theology of Jesus,' that of the primitive Church, and that of the Evangelists. But it is becoming increasingly clear that we have not the means in biblical scholarship to make an adequate distinction between the 'theology of Jesus' and the earliest credal, liturgical or kerygmatic formulations. By the very nature of the Gospels we must content ourselves with gradually distinguishing between the theology of the early Church and that of the Evangelists as individual authors. And it is in the study of the latter that the new redaction-criticism promises to contribute substantially to our understanding of the Gospels.

This admission does not mean that we accept the radical impossibility of ever separating the historical events that founded Christianity from the theological elaborations of the early Christian community, that is of distinguishing between post-Resurrection faith and pre-Resurrection event. Such a distinction can and must be made to protect the unique historical dimension of the Christian faith. The basis for it, whatever the techniques of exegesis by which it is evolved, is the fact that the proclamation of salvation-history in Christ was in the hands and under the control of the apostolic generation itself, the

¹ See, for example, P. Fannon, 'Paul and Tradition in the Primitive Church,' *Scripture*, vol. xvi, no. 34 (1964), pp. 47-56.

² cf. Schnackenburg, pp. 54-5

eye-witnesses whose ultimate transformation of the world reflected their personal transformation through lived contact with Jesus.¹

The second example of diversity in New Testament theology lies in the variety of authors or theologians whose writings make up the New Testament. Long before it was generally admitted that the Synoptic Evangelists were theologians in their own right, biblical scholars recognised and expounded the theology of St Paul, the theology of St John, that of the author of Hebrews, and others. We are dealing here with a diversity of mature New Testament theologies on the latest of the levels just discussed. Often there has been too much concentration upon the differences between these theologians, leading finally to the extreme position of some nineteenth-century liberal theology which interpreted St Paul, for example, as in direct opposition to Jesus and the early Christian community of Palestine or to St Peter. If this exaggerated view was thought to have been laid to rest, in part by the recognition of the Jewish elements in Pauline theology, it has recently been revived in new forms and again there is a movement to restore the balance by concentrating on the radical unity of the New Testament message.² Another example of an extreme position is the once fashionable stress on the opposition between John's Gospel and the Synoptics, in which John was held to be a late and purely speculative, mystical, Hellenistic reflection on Jesus Christ. Recent general acknowledgment of the first-century date of the Fourth Gospel and of its Palestinian background have helped replace the individuality of St John in its proper perspective without blurring it entirely.³

The search for a bond of unity among these varied theological interpretations of the message of salvation has often taken a form which brings to light still another category of diversity. Many New Testament theologians have attempted to integrate the whole New Testament by choosing one or several of its basic theological themes and tracing them through the historical and personal levels of development. A variety of themes lend themselves to this treatment: Christology, eschatology, the Kingdom or the Church, charity, soteriology and the like. Sometimes a single theme is sought as the fundamental one that

¹ On all the problems of Gospel interpretation we may now refer to the eminently valuable book of X. Léon-Dufour, S.J., *Les évangiles et l'histoire de Jésus* (Paris: Seuil, 1963).

² cf. W. G. Kümmel, 'Jesus und Paulus,' *New Testament Studies* 10 (1964), pp. 163-81. A view of the differences between the theologies of Paul and John that does not do violence to their unity may be found in P. Benoit's article 'Paulinisme et Johannisme,' *New Testament Studies* 9 (1963), pp. 193-207.

³ Among a wealth of material on John we may mention R. Brown, 'The Problem of Historicity in John,' *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 24 (1962), pp. 1-14. On both the questions mentioned in this paragraph see the balanced essay of A. Fridrichsen, 'Jesus, St John and St Paul,' *The Root of the Vine* (London, 1953), pp. 37-62.

contains in itself the principle of unity of New Testament theology, but there is no agreement about which is the correct one. Again, other theologians trace all these themes through the material on the grounds that that is in principle what the New Testament writers themselves set out to do. But is this so? The New Testament writers attempted to understand and explain Jesus Christ and his message of salvation as they found it in the apostolic tradition. For this purpose they dealt with and elaborated the various themes that are present in their work, but no merely parallel treatment of these can reproduce their theology.

On the other hand, to the extent to which such themes are present in the New Testament it is legitimate and useful to isolate them for theological analysis, and in fact some of the most valuable products of 'New Testament theology' have been monographs on particular themes such as these. To mention but two examples, we may refer to C. Spicq's great study of *agape* in the New Testament¹ and R. Schnackenburg's penetrating work on the Kingdom of God.²

The bond of unity

Must the New Testament theologian resign himself to respecting these various manifestations of diversity within the New Testament and go no further? It is the New Testament itself which insists upon the unity of the faith and implies that a systematic presentation of it must be unified. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all; the diversity of gifts is intended 'for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God' (Eph. 4:5-6, 12-13). The obvious principle of unity in New Testament theology that must come to everyone's mind is Jesus Christ himself. Everything in the New Testament relates to Christ: there is one faith and one baptism only because there is one Lord. But as we have seen, the various types of diversity in New Testament theology cannot simply be brought together by reference to the revelation made in and by Jesus because in the sources we are confronted with this revelation, with the preaching of Jesus himself, only through the witness of the Church's first theologians. The objectivity of this witness does not come into question, but the unity in Christ should be regarded as the *implicit* bond of unity in New Testament theology.³ The explicit bond of unity may be sought precisely in the earliest historical witness to faith in Christ, the preaching or kerygma

¹ The first volume is now available in English: *Agape in the New Testament. I. Agape in the Synoptic Gospels*, trans. M. A. McNamara and M. H. Richter (London: B. Herder, 1963).

² *God's Rule and Kingdom*, trans. J. Murray (Edinburgh: Nelson, 1963).

³ Schnackenburg, p. 22, distinguishes the formal and material principles of this unity. For the following paragraph, see Schnackenburg, pp. 24-7.

of the earliest apostolic Church as it is found throughout the New Testament but intimately woven into the writings of the individual authors.

In view of the complexity of the New Testament itself, it is clear that a theology of it must respect as far as possible the historical development of theology within the New Testament period. The precise chronology of the early Church has not been established and seems out of reach of scholarship because the sources do not preserve it. But we are aware of an historical development proceeding along broad lines from the preaching of the Pentecost recorded in Acts down to the theological reflection of the latest New Testament writers. And a biblical theology that seeks its principle of unity in the traditional message of the apostolic Church is capable of a genuine historical development. Such a bond of unity will satisfy the various types of diversity that we have discussed. It will clearly—as clearly as the state of scientific biblical research at any given time allows—distinguish the levels of theological evolution; it will attempt to show how the ‘mature’ theologians such as Paul, John and the author of Hebrews have developed the early kerygma, liturgy and creeds which were their direct materials; and it will seek to relate all the themes of New Testament theology to the central theme of Christology contained in the earliest preaching. Moreover, it will provide a vehicle for the fruits of redaction-criticism, the individual Synoptic Evangelists seen as theologians in their own right, to be related to the whole picture of New Testament theology.

Structurally, such a New Testament theology would have to begin with an exposition of the primitive preaching, in which the sermon-outlines of Acts would have a prominent place but all the traces of early materials in the Epistles and especially in the Gospels would not be neglected. It would then move on to consider the Synoptics and the remaining books precisely as developments from this kerygma, introducing the various themes as they are in fact made explicit in the New Testament.

No such theology of the New Testament has so far been written, and the writing of it would entail a massive grasp of the present state of exegetical, historical, linguistic and all the other disciplines which are the stuff of biblical scholarship. But the point of these observations is that insofar as a unified direction is observable in New Testament scholarship, it is towards just such a theology that present trends seem to be working.

The work of Bonsirven sets out expressly to respect the historical evolution of the faith.¹ He distinguishes four levels of development

¹ See his methodological introduction, pp. xi-xvi

which make up the four parts of the book, the states of New Testament religion represented by Jesus, the primitive community, St Paul, and finally the other apostolic witnesses (chiefly the other Epistles). This is of course a sound outline, but it tends to confine the second level to the first twelve chapters of Acts and to reject the task of adequately uncovering the whole of the primitive community's traditions as a nucleus of theology. It is respectful of the diversity of New Testament theology (except insofar as Bonsirven lumps together the evidence of the Synoptics and the Fourth Gospel), but it does not do justice to what seems today to be a leading preoccupation of New Testament, especially Gospel, research, namely the intricate relationship between the preaching of Jesus and that of the apostolic community.

The originality of Fr Quesnell's New Testament theology lies in part precisely in his effort to make the communication of 'this Good News' the centre of his work.¹ The book is highly to be recommended but it does not pretend to be a complete and comprehensive treatise. It evidences a deep concern for showing the relevance of New Testament theology both for the further development of Christian theology and for the present-day Christian's understanding of his faith. And this concern introduces a final observation on New Testament theology which we shall make here.

Relevance for present-day faith

Nothing has been said so far about the further problem of determining the extent to which a theology of the New Testament can be or should be shown at every step to be relevant for our contemporary faith. Much could be said on this subject, especially by way of evaluating the particular type of analysis and exposition contained in the monumental New Testament theology of Rudolf Bultmann, but we must limit our observations here to a more modest scope.

To begin with, any suggestion that the elaboration of a New Testament theology is of purely academic-historical interest, or worse of antiquarian interest, is belied by the very real and increasingly widespread interest in the Bible displayed by Christians everywhere. The preaching of the apostles can be addressed to contemporary Christians, is in fact addressed to them, and the liturgical and biblical renewal within the Church testifies to the effectiveness of the biblical message. Perhaps only one cautionary remark is needed, and that is to revert to what was said above about constructing a New Testament theology with the tools of modern thought. The first objective of this branch, as of all biblical studies, is to seek honestly to understand the sources as

¹ He discusses method in a 'Postscript on Biblical Theology,' pp. 207-20.

much as possible in the terms in which the early Church wrote them. Only when we can grasp what the message of the gospel meant to the early Christians are we in a position to reflect upon what it should mean to the world of today.¹ And then we shall find that a thoroughgoing process of 'demythologising,' either in the highly technical sense of Bultmann or in the less scientific manner of some proponents of 'Honest to God' theology, is unnecessary and illegitimate.

We must bypass the interesting and important question of the role biblical theology can play in what is certainly a leading concern of all modern theologising, the ecumenical movement. The collaboration of biblical scholars of all faiths has been a notable forerunner and is now an integral part of the ecumenical dialogue. And this close co-operation attains a much deeper level of meaning when it moves from the domain of purely exegetical or historical biblical research into that of New Testament theology.²

Anton Fridrichsen eloquently concludes his essay in *The Root of the Vine* with the statement that the problem of the unity of the New Testament can only be solved in living communion with the Church because the New Testament is the book of the Church and it is through the Church that Christ speaks in the Bible.³ In reality, by insisting that the extrinsic bond of unity in New Testament theology must be the preaching of the earliest Christian communities, we are affirming the same thing. The enduring vitality of the gospel message is an inseparable facet of the enduring vitality of the Church. And when we seek to listen to the voice of the New Testament in this way, it is the voice of the primitive Church in the full flowering of its charismatic mission that we hear.

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A NOTE ON THE DATING OF ST MARK'S GOSPEL

Three recently published books touch on this problem. In the new Pelican Gospel commentary, D. E. Nineham dates the Gospel of St Mark between 65 and 75, with a considered opinion in favour of the latter part of this bracket. He points out that the evidence

¹ K. Stendahl makes some very illuminating remarks on the need for a strictly descriptive biblical theology in his article on that subject in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (New York, 1962), vol. 1, pp. 418-32.

² See, for example, the favourable review of Bonsirven's *Theology* in *The Expository Times*, April 1964, pp. 193-4.

³ *op. cit.*, pp. 60-2