

A REVIEW ARTICLE

New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ

Reviewed by
Andrew David Naselli¹

New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ by Thomas R. Schreiner. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008. 990 pp. \$44.99.

ABOUT SCHREINER

Schreiner is James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament Interpretation and Associate Dean of Scripture and Interpretation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, where he has served since 1997. He earned his Ph.D. in NT under Donald A. Hagner at Fuller Theological Seminary in 1983, and he served as editor of *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* from 1999 to 2003. His books include *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990); *The Law and Its Fulfillment: A Pauline Theology of Law* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993); and *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001). He also coauthored *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001) and co-edited *The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will*, vol. 1: *Biblical and Practical Perspectives on Calvinism*, vol. 2: *Historical and Theological Perspectives on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), *Women in the Church: An Analysis and Application of 1 Timothy 2:9–15*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), and *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2007).

The intended audience of Schreiner's *New Testament Theology* (henceforth *NTT*) is pastors and students, not the academic community. For additional information about *NTT*, see my "Interview with Tom Schreiner on NT Theology" (August 1, 2008, available at <http://theologica.blogspot.com/2008/08/interview-with-tom-schreiner-on-nt.html>).

¹Dr. Naselli is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in New Testament exegesis and theology from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, IL.

APPROACHING NT THEOLOGY

Evangelical NT theologies generally approach the topic in one of two ways:

1. An analytic approach traces themes in units of the NT, grouping corpora such as the Synoptic Gospels, John's writings, Paul's letters, etc. (e.g., George Ladd, Leon Morris). Sometimes the approach is primarily book by book (the theology of Matthew, the theology of Mark, etc.)

2. A synthetic or thematic approach traces themes throughout the entire NT, organizing the book by those themes and then tracing those themes throughout units of the NT (e.g., Donald Guthrie).

Frank Thielman's recent "canonical and synthetic approach" combines both approaches, tracing the distinctive themes book by book (hence, "canonical" or analytic) but also including summaries that demonstrate a unity amid the diversity (hence, "synthetic" or thematic).

Schreiner's *NTT* is a thematic approach (pp. 9–13). He does not believe that "there is one correct way to write a NT theology" or even a superior approach to an NT theology, but he uses a thematic one because it is "particularly needed today" (p. 10). He acknowledges that a thematic approach could domesticate the text and flatten out the NT's diversity (p. 11).

NTT concludes with a useful primer to NT theology ("Appendix: Reflections on New Testament Theology," pp. 867–88). Starting with J. P. Gabler, Schreiner traces the genesis of the modern phenomenon of NT theologies, discussing distinctive contributions of the Tübingen school (primarily F. C. Baur and D. F. Strauss), William Wrede, Wilhelm Bousset, Adolf Schlatter, Geerhardus Vos, George Ladd, Karl Barth, Walther Eichrodt, Rudolf Bultmann, the biblical theology movement, James Barr, Brevard Childs, Donald Guthrie, Heikki Räisänen, and Peter Balla (pp. 871–82). He also contrasts "some of the all-embracing themes or centers" proposed by over a dozen biblical theologians (pp. 879–80). He explains the relationship between biblical and systematic theology (noting his indebtedness particularly to D. A. Carson and Charles Scobie) and defends the method he employs in *NTT* that assumes the NT's unity and coherence (pp. 882–88, cf. 10–13).

Unlike many other approaches to NT theology, *NTT* does not propose a single "center":

I think it is safe to say that no alleged center will ever become the consensus. In one sense, having several different centers is useful, as NT theology can be studied helpfully from a number of different perspectives. Since the various perspectives are interlocking and not mutually exclusive, there are a diversity of ways by which the NT can be explored. Furthermore, examining the NT from different angles allows new light to be shed upon the text (p. 13).

The "perspective" from which Schreiner studies NT theology is

twofold: (1) God is God-centered, and (2) God fulfills his saving promises in Christ throughout history, particularly in his already-inaugurated-but-not-yet-consummated kingdom (pp. 13–14).

TRACING THE ARGUMENT

Thesis

Schreiner repeatedly specifies what *NTT* attempts to prove:

The thesis advanced in this book is that NT theology is God-focused, Christ-centered, and Spirit-saturated, but the work of the Father, Son, and Spirit must be understood along a salvation-historical timeline; that is, God's promises are already fulfilled but not yet consummated in Christ Jesus.... I will argue for the centrality of God in Christ in the concrete and specific witness of the NT as it unfolds God's saving work in history. Another way to put this is that God will receive all the glory for his work in Christ by the Spirit as he works out his purpose in redemptive history. Further, redemptive history is characterized by inaugurated but not consummated eschatology, so that the glory that belongs to God has not yet reached its zenith but it will (p. 23).

The theme of this book is that the new age has dawned and God has fulfilled his covenantal promises in Jesus Christ (p. 289).

I have argued that the NT focuses on the fulfillment of the saving promises of God given in the OT. The NT represents the climax of the story begun in the OT, but it is a bit like a mystery novel because the story is fulfilled in an astonishing way. God's promises are fulfilled in Christ through the Spirit, and yet we still await the fullness of what was promised. There is an already-not yet character to the fulfillment. The promises are inaugurated but not consummated (p. 865).

I argue in this book that magnifying God in Christ is the foundation or goal of NT theology, and God works out his purpose in salvation history to reach that goal (p. 880).

His introduction, a microcosm of his overall argument, surveys how this theme unfolds in the various NT corpora. What follows briefly traces the argument of the 19-chapter, 990-page book. My all-too-brief summaries may sound more like systematic theology and do not portray Schreiner's biblical theological method. His headings generally follow canonical order by corpora. (I list the number of pages after each chapter title below to indicate that some chapters are significantly longer than others. Chapters 13, 15, and 17 could each be stand-alone paperbacks.)

Part 1: The Fulfillment of God's Saving Promises: The Already-Not Yet

1. "The Kingdom of God in the Synoptic Gospels" (39 pp.): In Matthew, "the kingdom of heaven" is not a euphemism for "the kingdom of God," but rather a means of contrasting the ways of God and humans (pp. 46–47, following Jonathan Pennington). The OT focuses

on the future kingdom, but the kingdom is not “*only* future and eschatological” (p. 55). What Jesus meant by “the kingdom of God” is “God’s saving power, the fulfillment of his saving promises” (p. 79). “The kingdom was inaugurated in Jesus’ ministry but not yet consummated. It had arrived, but the full salvation and judgment promised had not yet come to pass” (p. 79).

2. “Eternal life and Eschatology in John’s Theology” (16 pp.): John’s gospel and first letter focus on “eternal life” rather than “the kingdom of God,” although the two expressions are basically identical. Eternal life likewise has an already-not yet aspect to it (e.g., John 10:28). Johannine dualism is Jewish, not Hellenistic.

3. “Inaugurated Eschatology Outside the Gospels” (21 pp.): The already-not yet theme continues in the rest of the NT but not as prominently with the terms “the kingdom of God” and “eternal life.” Contrasts include this age vs. the coming age; old vs. new creation; and present vs. future fulfillment of God’s saving promises (e.g., Jesus’ resurrection, the gift of the Holy Spirit).

Part 2. The God of the Promise: The Saving Work of the Father, Son, and Spirit

4. “The Centrality of God in New Testament Theology” (49 pp.): The God-centered nature of the NT is often so taken for granted that many focus on the periphery and overlook what is central. God is sovereign, merciful, glorious, loving, faithful, true, and just. He is supremely worthy of praise and trust.

5. “The Centrality of Christ in the Synoptic Gospels” (29 pp.): “The entire story of God’s plan converges on Jesus.... [H]e is the fulfillment of the OT Scriptures” (p. 196). Jesus is the new Moses, true wisdom, and God’s final prophet. He is divine.

6. “The Messiah and the Son of Man in the Gospels” (36 pp.): “Messiah” in the OT is not a technical term for a coming Davidic descendant, but the NT writers apply the term to Jesus by combining the OT concept of an anointed one with the OT promises that a future Davidic king would arrive and usher in peace and joy. The already-not yet twist in the NT is that this king was a “suffering Messiah” who faced the cross before wearing the crown. The Jews did not have a category to process this type of Messiah, which is probably why Jesus preferred the title “Son of Man.”

7. “Son of God, I Am, and Logos” (28 pp.): “Son of God” means more than just Messiah. It “designates Jesus as the true Israel and the true son of David” and “designates Jesus’ special and intimate relationship with God” (p. 260). As the preexistent Logos, Jesus is divine and shares equal dignity with the Father.

8. “Jesus’ Saving Work in the Gospels” (28 pp.): The Christology in the previous chapters is inseparable from the soteriology in this and the following chapters: Jesus’ saving work is efficacious because of who he is. The Gospels predominantly focus on Jesus’ cross-work and

resurrection, which are necessary to secure God's covenantal promises. Jesus is already resurrected and the new age inaugurated, but his people are not yet resurrected nor is the new age consummated. Although the Gospels do not explain the meaning of Jesus' death as explicitly as the epistles, they clearly convey that Jesus died for his people as a penal substitution for their sins.

9. "Jesus' Saving Work in Acts" (16 pp.): Acts does not reflect on Christology to the degree that John's Gospel does, not least because the book relates so many speeches in evangelistic settings. Its evangelistic theme, however, is profoundly Christological: Jesus is the Messiah who died on the cross and whom God raised from the dead to secure forgiveness of sins for those who repent and believe in him.

10. "The Christology of Paul" (34 pp.): "Christ is absolutely central in the history of salvation, and God's saving promises have been fulfilled in him" (p. 306). Paul's high Christology (i.e., the "in Christ" motif and his portrayal of Jesus as Messiah, human, Savior, Son of God, Lord, and God) is intrinsically connected to how people should live now in this new age that has dawned but has not yet been consummated.

11. "The Saving Work of God and Christ according to Paul" (41 pp.): Paul uses many different terms and metaphors to convey God's saving of sinners through Jesus: foreknowledge, love, mercy, election, predestination, grace, calling, justification, salvation, reconciliation, adoption, redemption, triumph over evil powers, sanctification, inheritance, glorification, and resurrection. No single dimension exhausts the rich depth of the salvation for which God in Christ deserves eternal praise. Christians in the current age already experience God's saving work, but they do not yet experience its fullness.

12. "The Christology of Hebrews–Revelation" (51 pp.): The rest of the NT corroborates the Christological-soteriological connection in the Gospels, Acts, and Paul's letters. Hebrews, for example, exalts Jesus as better than David, Adam, Moses, Joshua, Melchizedek, and the old covenant; he is God's divine Son and priest-king, securing salvation, redemption, propitiation, forgiveness of sins, and sanctification.

13. "The Holy Spirit" (76 pp.): Jesus' gift of the Holy Spirit to believers starting at Pentecost (not John 20:22) marks the beginning of the new age. Every Christian possesses the Spirit, a fundamental mark of conversion. He is God, and he glorifies Christ and strengthens believers.

Part 3. Experiencing the Promise: Believing and Obeying

14. "The Problem of Sin" (37 pp.): Part 2 addresses God's saving work, which "presupposes that human beings need to be rescued from sin" (p. 509). Sin certainly includes disobedience, but its essence is idolatry: "The root sin is the failure to praise and worship and thank God, to glorify him as God (Rom. 1:21)" (p. 522). One subset of

idolatry is legalism, “the view that one’s works are the basis of a right relation with God, so that one can boast in what one has accomplished” (p. 530). All humans enter the world spiritually dead and blind, stubborn and rebellious, condemned and headed toward physical death and eternal judgment. This is what makes the gospel good news. Jesus’ cross-work and resurrection defeated the reign of sin and death. The era of deliverance from sin and death has already dawned but is not yet consummated.

15. “Faith and Obedience” (71 pp.): The means through which people are saved from sin and death is faith in Jesus. A repentant faith is required to receive eternal life, but a genuine saving faith is a faith that perseveres in repentance and good works. “Virtually all the NT writers emphasize that one must persevere to the end in order to be saved on the eschatological day” (p. 615). A transformed life is evidence (not the means) of salvation. “The NT writers do not call on dead trees to produce fruit; they call for a new tree and a new creation,” a newness that believers have experienced and await for consummation at Jesus’ coming (p. 616). “All obedience that is pleasing to God flows from faith” (p. 617).

16. “The Law and Salvation History” (56 pp.): The relationship between the OT and NT involves both continuity and discontinuity. In the history of salvation, Jesus is the fulfillment of the law (continuity), but the Mosaic law is not binding on Christians, especially circumcision and Sabbath and purity laws (discontinuity). For Christians what God has done in Christ (the indicative) is the basis for how they should live (the imperative) through the Spirit’s strengthening.

Part 4. The People of the Promise and the Future of the Promise

17. “The People of the Promise” (80 pp.): The people of God in the NT are the church, variously known as “the body of Christ, or the true Israel, or the temple of God, or God’s ‘assembly’ (church) or synagogue” (p. 754). The universal church consists exclusively of genuine Christians, and local churches must lovingly discipline (with a view to restoration) those who unrepentantly teach or live contrary to the gospel. Elders or overseers lead the church, and deacons assist them. To symbolize the transformation from one’s old life to the new, the church baptizes those who repent and trust Jesus. To remember that Jesus’ death is the basis for this new life, the church regularly observes the Lord’s Supper. All Christians have spiritual gifts for edifying the church, which is responsible for global gospel-proclamation. The church expresses its reliance on God through prayer. “The church is called upon not to create unity but rather to preserve the unity that already exists” (p. 716).

18. “The Social World of God’s People” (47 pp.): The already-not yet tension in which Christians live works itself out in their relationship to their social world in at least five areas: (1) not being consumed

with riches; (2) embracing a complementarian view of women; (3) pleasing God in one's family, especially with reference to marriage and divorce; (4) submitting to government unless authorities mandate what God forbids; and (5) submitting to one's place in one's social system, even if it means slavery (though slaves should try to earn their freedom if possible).

19. "The Consummation of God's Promises" (63 pp.): The consummation of the already-not yet tension consists of three interrelated future events: (1) the coming of Jesus; (2) judgment (eternal conscious punishment in hell) for unbelievers; and (3) reward (eternal life in resurrected bodies) for believers. The encouraging prospect of Jesus' future return followed by judgment and reward is a means for believers to persevere and an ethical incentive to be prepared. "The new world and new universe will have arrived, and God will be all in all. Believers will worship and enjoy the Father, the Son, and the Spirit forever" (p. 864). An excursus on "The Future of Israel" concludes, "Paul identifies the church of Jesus Christ as the true Israel (e.g., in Galatians), and at the same time he posits a future salvation for ethnic Israel (Rom. 9–11)" (p. 860).

EVALUATION

Limitations

1. *NTT* uses transliterated Greek and Hebrew rather than actual Greek and Hebrew fonts. Perhaps a better format would follow the Baker Exegetical Commentary on the NT: Greek/Hebrew font followed by a transliteration and translation.

2. It could be tightened up by omitting needless words. The writing style is not as informal as a conversation, but it is closer to that end of the spectrum than to a formal, tightly argued treatise. Consequently, it is probably longer than necessary, frequently repeating and restating concepts much as a professor might do in a classroom lecture. Though an effective pedagogical technique, it may try the patience of some readers.

3. The organization on a micro-level (i.e., beyond the four parts) is not always intuitive or easy to follow.

4. Although Schreiner does not claim to be a covenant theologian, his eschatology is at least compatible with amillennialism. (Those who embrace amillennialism, of course, would not consider this a limitation.)

5. It contains some unconvincing interpretational surprises. For example, in Daniel 7, "the son of man represents the saints and receives the kingdom from the Ancient of Days" (p. 232, cf. 214–16).

6. It occasionally dismisses other interpretational options without much interaction. For example, Schreiner rejects the possibility of a pretribulational rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 with a single sentence: "It is clear from this text that Jesus will return with fanfare, rendering improbable the popular notion that 'a secret rapture' precedes

the coming of Jesus by seven years” (p. 819).

Strengths

1. The core thesis is outstanding: the foundation and goal of NT theology is glorifying God in Christ, and God sovereignly accomplishes that goal in salvation history.

2. *NTT* is theologically conservative. For example, Schreiner argues for the historical reliability of the NT, accepts all thirteen Pauline letters as genuine, and defends the inspiration and authority of Scripture.

3. It defends, with a biblical theological methodology, Calvinism, complementarianism, and Baptist ecclesiology (though the latter two play a significantly smaller role in *NTT*).

4. It is preoccupied with the text. Scripture sets the agenda rather than the categories of systematic theology or the constructs of secondary literature. Schreiner explains,

I wrote the first three drafts without consulting any secondary sources. Before I wrote, I carefully took notes on the entire NT, noting what NT authors discussed, so that my NT theology would be anchored by the text. I proceeded this way so that I would be compelled to work inductively from the biblical text instead of deriving my outline or general train of thought from others. Even in these three drafts, however, I am indebted to those who have taught me and whose work I have read over the years. After writing the initial drafts, I read secondary sources. Naturally, such reading led to further revisions, and I am immensely grateful to the outstanding work of many scholars who have sharpened my understanding of NT theology (p. 9).

For those accustomed to systematic theological approaches but not biblical theological ones, *NTT* may seem to lack crisp organization and to repeat themes unnecessarily while discussing different corpora. On the other hand, *NTT* devotes fairly proportional space to what the text addresses (e.g., far more on Christology and soteriology than eschatology).

5. What Schreiner says of Schlatter is true of Schreiner, too: “He consistently emphasizes the impact that the message of Jesus had on the lives of hearers” (p. 875). *NTT* is not divorced from application. It reflects the pastoral heart of Schreiner, who has served as a preaching pastor for the past eleven years.

6. It is well researched and evidences decades of full-time teaching on the seminary level. Although his intended audience is not academia, Schreiner still manages an average of 2.8 footnotes per page.

7. *NTT* is useful as a mini-commentary worth consulting when working on a particular passage or theme (see the Scripture and subject indexes).

8. Schreiner concisely lists views and argues for his. Examples include the meaning of 1 John 3:9 (pp. 567–68) and the genitive use of πίστεως Χριστοῦ (pp. 574–76).

9. Regardless of whether one agrees with his amillennial-friendly eschatology, Schreiner rightly emphasizes that the NT's *primary* theological reason for addressing eschatology is ethical, namely, to exhort Christians to live a certain way in light of Jesus' future coming.

10. The twenty-two page appendix is an especially useful overview of NT theology.

11. *NTT* is available electronically in Libronix from Logos Bible Software. In this format the book's advantages increase significantly. (See my two reviews of Logos products in the 2006 and 2007 issues of *DBSJ*.)

Schreiner's *NTT* is commendable for its depth and breadth. He understands where a biblical theology of the NT fits in the overall theological task, namely, that it is foundational to systematic theology. *NTT* is a welcome, impressive addition to NT studies for the benefit of Christ's church.