

New Testament Theology

by Donald Guthrie (IVP, 1981, 1064 pp., \$24.95). Reviewed by D. A. Carson, Professor of New Testament, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

From the pen of a mature scholar who has already given us the standard textbook *New Testament Introduction* (3rd ed. 1970), as well as competent commentaries on Galatians and on the Pastoral Epistles, not to mention several other works, comes this major *New Testament Theology*. And there is no doubt that it too will rapidly become a standard.

The major innovation in this volume is its organization. Most NT theologies (e.g. those of Bultmann, Ladd, Kummel and many others) outline and explain the principal theological themes of each corpus of NT literature, such as "Pauline writings" or "Johannine literature." This has the advantage of providing a "feel" for the main emphases and thrusts of each corpus; but it suffers from two disadvantages. First, it provides no forum for discussing the constituent elements of NT theology as parts of the whole: whatever unity the NT has is not adequately considered. Second, even when different parts of the NT deal with the same theme (say, "Kingdom of God," or a Christological title such as "Son of Man"), the standard organization does not provide for comparison of treatments, still less for attempts at synthesis. Guthrie has changed all this throughout his book, with the exception of

the introduction and the first chapter. The remaining nine chapters, almost nine-tenths of the book, are structured to provide a discussion of various central themes in each corpus of the NT, wherever such themes appear, along with a concluding summary. These nine chapters are titled, respectively, "Man and his World," "Christology," "The mission of Christ," "The Holy Spirit," "The Christian Life," "The church," "The future," "The New Testament approach to ethics," and "Scripture." Yet these titles barely hint at the wealth of material. For instance, the longest chapter, on Christology, after a brief introduction and a section on "Jesus as man," treats the humanity of Jesus and the sinlessness of the man Jesus in the various divisions of the NT, before discussing the Christological titles "Messiah," "Son of David," "Servant," "Son of man," "Lord," "Son of God," "Logos," and "God" — as well as such categories as the "I am" sayings, Jesus as prophet and teacher, and the last Adam. Still in the same chapter, Guthrie discusses major Christological "hymns" and certain Christological events (the virgin birth, the resurrection and the ascension), before offering the chapter's concluding pages, under the subtitle "Jesus, God and man."

Of course, *which* NT corpuses are discussed varies from topic to topic: e.g. under "Logos," Guthrie includes "The Johannine literature" and "The rest of the New Testament," whereas under "Messiah" the breakdown is "The Jewish background," "The synoptic gospels," "The Johannine literature," "Acts," "Paul," "The rest of the New Testament," and "The significance of the title." It must not be thought that groupings like "The Johannine literature" are inviolable: for instance, under "The humanity of Jesus," Guthrie separates (rightly) "The Johannine literature" from "Revelation."

The first two chapters of this book provide a lengthy discussion of the nature, definition, background, limitations and structure of New Testament theology (pp. 21–74). The next chapter is on God (pp. 75–115); and here the treatment is strictly topical, covering the entire NT corpus against the background of the OT.

If there is a disadvantage to the approach adopted by Guthrie, it is that one must work a little harder to gain a bird's eye view of the central thrusts of each corpus as a whole. But others have attempted such presentations; and the rich benefits of Guthrie's approach outweigh any loss that might be involved. Here there is corpus by corpus exposition and comparison of central NT themes, along with serious attempts at summarization and synthesis.

Guthrie's *Theology* is a textbook: it is not designed to make a lot of telling advances, but conveniently and courteously sifts a copious quantity of discussion and presents it in digestible format. Whenever I disagreed with a point or longed for more exegesis or detailed debate (it must be said that the discussion is sometimes a trifle bland), I tried to remind myself not only of the purpose of the volume, but also its length: how much more discussion, after all, could have been squeezed into one textbook? Moreover, on some topics (e.g. the sections on "The saving work of Christ"), Guthrie's work is much more satisfying than that of its closest rival, the *Theology* by Ladd. At any rate, no serious student of the NT can afford to ignore this useful compendium; and for many it will become the standard text.