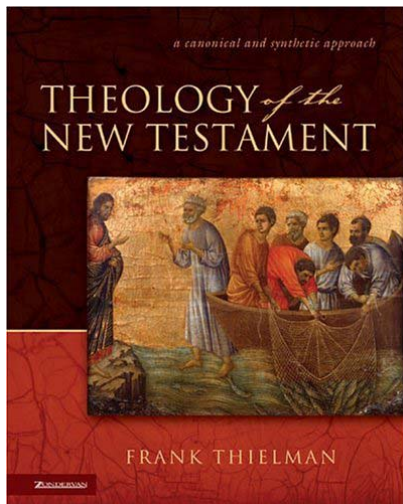


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Thielman, Frank

Theology of the New Testament: A Canonical and Synthetic Approach

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D. A. Carson
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School
Deerfield, IL 60015

We seem to be living in a time when (to modify the words of a wise man) “of the making of New Testament theologies there is no end.” The crucial thing to ask about any new one that appears on the scene, therefore, is what it contributes to the pile.

Thielman, Professor of New Testament at Beeson Divinity School, tells us he has written the book for two reasons: “to provide a service and to make a case” (9). The “service” is providing “serious students” of the New Testament with “a brief theological orientation to each New Testament text” (9); the case that he wishes to make is to show that, when they are read sympathetically, these texts are theologically unified. Methodologically, Thielman positions himself somewhere in the middle along two axes. With respect to the first axis, he wants to anchor these texts in the cultures, politics, and religious traditions of their own day, so as not to cut them off from real life, even while he takes to heart the insistence of Schlatter and others to the effect that “it is neither irrational nor unreasonable to read these texts sympathetically—as they want to be read—and from the perspective of a Christian faith that acknowledges them to be the Word of God” (9). With respect to the second axis, when faced with the polarity between those who treat each document or corpus separately and those who try to place the documents in conversation with one another (one thinks of Caird), Thielman attempts both.

Organizationally, he follows “a roughly chronological approach” (10), but “roughly” must be emphasized. After an introductory chapter, on which more in a moment, the book

is divided into three sections: (1) “The Gospels and Acts”; (2) “The Pauline Letters”; (3) “The Non-Pauline Letters and the Revelation of John.” By putting the Gospels (including John) and Acts before the Paulines, something important is being said about Thielman’s conviction that the Gospels enable us to get at the ultimate foundation of New Testament theology, Jesus himself. Reading Acts in this section preserves the unity of Luke-Acts, but chronologically, of course, most of the Paulines were written during the period covered by the Acts narrative, and on almost any dating of the documents, most were circulating before the writing of Acts was complete. The book ends with a concluding chapter on “The Theological Unity of the New Testament” (681–725).

In his introductory chapter (19–42), Thielman addresses two questions. First, should one heed the clarion demands of Gabler, Wrede, and Räisänen to detach New Testament history from New Testament theology? (Including Gabler in this trio entails something of a misreading of him, I think, but I will let that pass.) Thielman argues that the history is important but that studying the documents for their theological content is not necessarily “an act of submission to the fourth-century councils and bishops who canonized the New Testament documents” (33). Far from it: “Christians who study New Testament theology stand in continuity with the Christian communities that have valued these books since ancient times as the touchstone of Christian identity. Their decision to treat precisely these books flows from an inner, spiritual conviction that they are the Word of God” (33). In other words, Thielman’s rationale for studying New Testament theology depends rather more on communal Christian identity across the centuries, and on “inner, spiritual conviction,” than on constructing credible links between history and theology in the fashion, say, of Peter Balla. Second, Thielman surveys not only the diversity of New Testament themes but also the extent to which some of these themes are widely thought to be in blunt contradiction with other themes: the theology of the historical Jesus against that of the Evangelists, the theology of glory in Luke-Acts against Paul’s theology of the cross, the Spirit-driven church in the earliest years of the church over against the “early catholic” picture of the Pastorals, and so forth. Thielman addresses these sorts of issues in his detailed chapters. Here he writes more generally and blandly on the occasional nature of the New Testament documents, God’s “otherness” as part of what generates the complexity, and so forth, while appealing to the pattern of second-century and later Christians who saw the New Testament documents as a unifying reality in their Christian commitments.

In his first major section, Thielman begins with a chapter on “The Persistence and Importance of a Fourfold Gospel” and ends with a chapter on “Four Diverse Witnesses to the One Gospel of Jesus Christ.” In between he treats, in order, Mark, Matthew, Luke-Acts, and John. In each case he responsibly treats topics one would expect him to treat, such as the messianic secret in Mark, Luke’s handling of salvation history, signs and faith

in John, and so forth. Each section is concluded with a brief and pertinent summary, making the entire work very user-friendly, especially for students. Each Gospel is treated as it bears witness to Jesus (which of course is what a Gospel purports to do), not as it ostensibly provides data for the construction of diverse Christian communities. The descriptions of the theological content of each book are fair and clear. While he avoids unhelpful harmonizing, Thielman does not address most critical challenges (which are left to introductions). The integration comes in the concluding chapter of the section, and even here Thielman is careful not to flatten out the distinctive contribution of each Gospel but rather allow each palette to make its contribution to a still larger portrait. The general approach will be attractive to those of us who think that Jesus himself provides the only adequate explanation for the rise of early Christianity; it will be generally disdained by those of us who think that the Gospels must be viewed rather more as opaque paintings barring the way back to the historical Jesus rather than as stained-glass windows that enable us to see through to the historical Jesus himself. Thielman's approach to the Gospels reminds me of the important work by Paul Barnett, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity: A History of New Testament Times* (1999), to which Thielman, astonishingly, makes no reference.

The next section of the work begins with a chapter on "The Coherence and Center of Paul's Theology" and ends with "The Common Emphases and Central Convictions of Paul's Letters." In between, one chapter, of highly variable length, is devoted to each epistle, beginning with 1 Thessalonians. (On Galatians, Thielman adopts the minority view of Moisés Silva, viz., a South Galatian geography with a late chronology.) Each of these chapters contains a considerable amount of survey-style exposition of the biblical text at hand. (In his preface Thielman warns his readers that he expects them to have an open Bible near at hand.) Usually Thielman's exposition simply sets forth his own understanding of the text without substantive interaction with the interpretations of others. He reserves the footnotes for brief comments on some opposing views and to provide bibliographical information in support of his own views.

Following the same organizational structure as in the previous two sections, the third and last section begins with a chapter entitled "Finding Unity in the Non-Pauline Letters and Revelation" and ends with "The Clash of World Views in Hebrews to Revelation." In between are chapters devoted to James, Jude, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, 1 Peter, Hebrews, and Revelation—in that order. Why this sequence? That is laid out in the prefatory chapter of this section, which discusses and substantially dismisses the "early catholicism" thesis, at least in any of its strong forms. Thielman virtually avoids questions about authorship, and matters of date appear only in connection with the cautious debunking of "early catholicism." Without wanting to impose on these nine texts a unity that really is not there, Thielman asserts that they seem "to fall into two broad

categories defined by the primary problems they address” (494). First, six of these nine (the first six on his list) address problems of doctrinal deviation—whether deviation from the Pauline tradition or from the Johannine tradition. Thus James, Jude, and 2 Peter all seem to be aware of some Christians who, apparently rallying to the banner of Paul, have interpreted Paul’s doctrine of justification through faith alone in a heretical (Thielman’s word) direction, detaching saving faith entirely from the performance of good works. Of course, this analysis rules out the possibility that James, at least, was written very early. The three Johannine epistles confront those who are turning their backs on the Johannine tradition. Second, the final three documents (1 Peter, Hebrews, Revelation) “are concerned primarily with the Christian response to persecution” (494). Hence the order of their appearance in this section of Thielman’s book.

The concluding chapter, “The Theological Unity of the New Testament” (681–725), unifies the contributions of the New Testament texts under several large banners (and many small ones), namely, “The Convergence of the Human Problem and God’s Answer to It in Jesus,” “Faith as Response to God’s Gracious Initiative,” “The Spirit as the Eschatological Presence of God,” “The Church as the People of God,” “The Consummation of All Things,” and “The Centrality of Christ to the Theological Vision of the New Testament.”

Any book that surveys this much biblical exegesis and theology cannot possibly command the full agreement of any informed reviewer. Yet precisely because the work is cautious, gentle, understated, largely unadventurous, there is little to deplore. Scholars steeped in New Testament theologies will find few surprises here, yet just enough that a rapid reading to understand how Thielman puts things together will prove beneficial. The real value of the book is for students. The text is easily accessible to first- and second-year seminary students, and the notes may help the more curious of them to probe below the surface. Indeed, in the very best sense of the word, this work is *edifying*. In this day when we are learning afresh the importance of nurturing faith communities on the text of Scripture, this will surely be welcomed by all but the most jaded and the most cynical.

I have two substantive criticisms (apart from many little niggles where I see things slightly differently). The first, I hope, is not simply a suggestion that Thielman should have written a different sort of book, for that criticism is easy to make and rarely fair. It is this: in making the book so accessible, in the gentleness and the understatement, in preserving the edifying tone, Thielman sacrifices a bit too much of the cut and thrust of the discipline. Introductory students do not need to be exposed, in the very first instance, to every theological and historical debate that New Testament theology has dredged up, but I sometimes wished, when reading Thielman’s *Theology*, for a little more historical perspective and a fair bit more contemporary perspective. If someone knows quite a lot

about the debates over the so-called “new perspective” on Paul, for instance, one can easily infer how Thielman wends his way through these minefields and where he emerges on the other side. But a student being introduced to New Testament theology for the first time could finish this book and remain unaware that there has been, and (to some extent) still is, a debate going on. This detachment from contemporary debate, apart from fairly bland notes that give no hint at the structure of each debate, robs the work somewhat of its pedagogical potential. In other words, if a lecturer were using this book as a text, he or she would need to supplement it with some punchy material that nestled New Testament theology in contemporary (and, ideally, also historical) discussion and debate. Further evidence for this shortcoming is found in the bibliography. Despite its formidable size, it includes astonishingly few references to major journal and dictionary articles and to major works that have carried these debates forward and replied to opponents.

My second criticism is closer to that nasty species of evaluation in which a reviewer has the cheek to articulate why another sort of book is needed. I can easily sympathize with why Thielman does not devote more space to establishing the connections between New Testament theological themes and history: his book is already long enough, and he thereby avoids a lot of unpleasant and perennial debates. Yet I confess I would have been happier with a book 50 percent longer if he had worked out more of the history/theology interface. That would have made the book more useful for the classroom and would have diminished the blandness—and I do not think it would have been necessary to decrease the edifying tone, which, for me, is a major plus.

Yet if push comes to shove, I prefer a New Testament theology that gives beginning students a feel for the content, diversity, and unity of the New Testament, even while sacrificing some of the cut and thrust of contemporary debate, over one that is both comprehensive and up-to-the-minute on historical and contemporary debates but that utterly fails to introduce the student to the actual content of the New Testament documents. In the hands of a good teacher who will supplement it where it has chosen not to focus attention, this book will make a very fine classroom textbook.