

A Book Review: On Examining Frank Thielman's

Theology of the New Testament
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[Summarized for Virginia Triumphant College & Seminary Review]

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Frank Thielman, Presbyterian professor of divinity at Beeson Divinity School, Stamford University, Birmingham, Alabama offers refreshing clarity and organizational insight into the theology of the New Testament. *Theology of the New Testament* is a canonical and systematic approach and Thielman describes it as “*somewhere between those whose New Testament Theologies are basically theological histories of early Christianity and those who stick closely to the theological concerns of the New Testament Canon.*” Professor Thielman incorporates both caveat and criticism, particularly that of William Wrede that “*merely discussing what the New Testament say about a variety of topics stand in danger of cutting those text free from culture, politics and religious tradition that anchor them to real life.*” In Thielman's own words: “*I have, therefore tried to produce a theology of the New Testament rather than a theological history of early Christianity.*”

Any approach to formulating a theology of the New Testament is a challenging task and undertaking through 27 Books of diverse authorship and to a great extent, variance in systematic and canonical theology within the records of early Christianity. Thielman meets the challenge within culture, politics and religious tradition, taking an equation and consideration for the cultural, historical context and setting of each of the Books.

Questions and Division

The Book introduces some very basic questions before entering the Chapter halls of the Gospels, Pauline Letters and non-Pauline Letters, including the Revelations of John. At the end of each Chapter, Thielman provides a synthetic chapter with conclusions after intrinsic dialogue and connecting strands within each. Finally, towards the end, Thielman strives towards some basic theological unity, a more cohesive theology with connecting strands.

In its broadest sense, the basic question is whether given the existing documents with uncertain chronology and authorship can lend itself to the arrival of a unified theology as a physicist would develop a “*Field Theory*”. This is apparent when Thielman delves into theological coherence and ask: “*is it accurate to speak of New Testament theology at all as if we are speaking of some coherent whole?*” He then questions whether this is theology or history.

Theological Challenges

Examining the views held by the early church and the development of ***“biblical theology”***, the survey proceeds into the Protestant Reformation*, thereby branching off from Catholic control of doctrine, dogma and theological challenge by Johann Philipp Garber, William Wrede and Heikki Raisanen. Both Wrede and Raisanen have common elements in each challenge. According to Garber, theologians have been reading backwards ***“biblical theology”*** and the exegetical texts with claims of authority in the Bible and disunity of the Church. In short, ***a kind of eisegesis rather than exegesis for theological formulation.*** William Wrede says the name ***“New Testament Theology”**** is wrong. Historians and theologians should ***“aim at describing the early Christian of religion”***, by which Wrede means ***“what was believed, thought, hoped, required and striven for in the earliest period of Christianity.”*** Heikki Raisanen in ***Beyond New Testament Theology*** that an early historical study and account of early Christian religion was essential, but saw the real value of conclusions in studying the theological. twenty-seven New Testament books.

There are common elements in the three challenges, which allows for doctrinal and theological attack. These are the contradictory, historical and exegetical concerns. In summation, over the last three centuries, Raisanen, Wrede and Garber have posed significant challenges to the New Testament, historically and theologically. An historical approach tends to take precedent over the theological. All of them, including Thielman, urge separation of the historical from the theological. ***Such challenges present to New Testament theologians, the need for clarity and purpose; also distinction and examination between history and canons without giving full allegiance to Fourth Century apostolicity and councils who canonized the documents.***

Problems of Diversity and Contradiction

The diversity of theological statements as in all disciplines present added challenge to ***coherency : to see the commonality in diversity and the universality in allocated distinctions.*** On first impression, diversity lends itself readily to points that appear to be antithetical and contradictory. Thielman as others have made a catalog of such apparent contradictions for reconciliation. For example, ***How can Paul say that there is neither slave nor free in Galatians 3:28, but slaves should obey their masters with fear and trembling in Ephesians 6:5? How can Jesus nullify the Mosaic dietary commandments in Mark’s Gospel (Mark 7:15,19), but claim in Matthew and Luke that not even a dot of the law will become void (Matt 5:18); (Luke 16:17)?*****

* We must note that Thielman presents a New Testament Theology, as many others, from the Western perspectives of Christianity without the diversity inclusion of the Coptic Church of Alexandria, the Eastern Orthodox Churches of a divided Christianity; humanity and divinity of Jesus and the irresolution of the filioque controversy (1054 AD

**Most scholars recognize that Matthew and Luke drew much material from Mark and the Q Source. Accordingly, without textual criticism, translation problems of deletion or interpolation could have arisen to the vanishing bubble of contradiction which is tantamount to no contradiction at all.

Most problems of theological diversity are resolved by identifying “*a canon within a canon*”. Martin Luther claims that “*justification by faith*” is the touchstone of all theology and found four canonical books i.e., *Hebrews, James, Jude and Revelations, deficient by standard*.

Thielman issues a cautionary note to the limits of rationalism and its use. He notes that theological diversity of the New Testament should not be used as a weapon or a contradictory whip in the hands of human reason to force Christian interpreters of the New Testament to abandon their study of New Testament theology. “*Reason itself*”, he says, “*should recognize both its own usefulness and its limitations, and realize that faith addresses its limitations.*”. Any student in New Testament theological search and study formulation (while grounded in faith and fundamentalism) is faced with the awesome task of the historian who believe that the historical work of the New Testament theologians is hopelessly biased and those who believe that it is hopelessly diverse.

The Fourfold Gospel: the Gospels and Acts

Efforts have been made to reduce or harmonize the Gospels and its diversity in the early Church. Some of the diversity is chronological, historical and canonical. The early Christians had a deep theological stake in the accuracy of historical records of the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. There were attempts to reduce or harmonize diversity. Many opponents of Christianity pointed to the discrepancies between the Gospels as proof that Christianity was false. Thielman cites the philosopher, Porphyry, his book *Against the Christians*, which deals with inconsistencies that plagued the four Gospels. St. Augustine notes in his treatise *On the Harmony of the Gospels* says that “*he undertook the work because the adversaries of Christianity are in the habit of adducing as their primary evidence that the evangelist are not in harmony with one another*”. He seems to be contemplating, Porphyry.

The Gospel of Peter appeared and even though its text is incomplete and its motives for production are unknown, there appears to be attempts to synthesize the four Gospels. This single harmonized and unified narrative and account is attributed to Peter. There have been other attempts. Most notably, Justin Martyr’s student Tatian made one of the most comprehensive attempts to produce a “*single Gospel*” which would replace the other four. Tatians work gained a wide measure of acceptance, most prominently in the Syria-speaking Churches until the end of the Third Century. The *Diatessaron* as it was called had literary references in Arabic, Persian, Armenian, Latin, Old and High German, Middle Dutch and Middle English and was extant for nearly three hundred years. In the Fifth Century, the Bishop of Cyrrhus, Theodore felt compelled to destroy existing copies and replace them with the original Gospels. From Origen, St Jerome and St. Augustine in the early Church, the trend was away from mega gospel (unitary/harmonized) presentations for theological and doctrinal unity of the fourfold Gospel.

The Pauline Letters

Frank Thielman finds within the field of New Testament theology, Paul who brings to the table his own Pauline theology, sometimes coherent, sometimes changed and many times, basically inconsistent. It is apparent that Pauline theology sets forth some harmony and reconciliation. There is, however, much support for Paul historically as the “*Prince of Theologians*”. Many notable theologians today and New Testament scholars believe that Paul was a coherent and theologically consistent thinker. According to Thielman, Paul was not a systematic theologian who wrote letters with the intention that others would perform analysis, exegesis or theological export. It is suggested that agreement or disagreement is from the fact that more information is available regarding him. Under the greatest moments of stress and conflict, Paul was attempting to establish Apologetics within and outside of the Church and his praxis in his work. Paul certainly provides much information regarding his convictions and opens himself to test and analyses. Perhaps the best of Paul’s theology lies not in his letters, but in the praxis theology of his actual work.

It is certainly well-recognized that Paul’s status as a theologian is that he was primarily an apostle attempting to work out the implication of the Gospel in the communities that his preaching had established. His letters reflect the character of his theological thinking, some of which, is interpretive by special circumstances. His zeal in apostolic activity may have resulted in overstatements, misstatements and development, but yet provided profound theological insight. After all, Paul in his humanity may have been flawed in his perfection and correction for divine insight.

After Paul’s, the Church failed to understand the delicate interplay between coherence and consistency in Paul’s letters, thereby transforming Paul into a “*dogmatician*”. This proceeded well into the Eighteenth Century until interpreters could come to appreciate the historical, cogent and insightful natures of Paul’s letters. Earlier, Paul had to part ways with the Antiochene Church (Gal.2:11-14). Here members were required to keep part of the law to assure levitical purity. Paul moved to establish churches in both Corinth and Ephesus. It is here that he developed the “*theology of the cross*” as a response to Corinthian readiness when faced with the interpretation of the Gospel *in the hands of the economically, socially and the spiritually powerful*. Paul asserts that “*God works through weakness and with those who offer nothing to him and who depend solely on his grace.*”

There are certainly those who are not impressed with quality of Paul’s theological thinking. Some argue that Paul’s statements are contrived rationalizations. E.P. Sanders is perhaps the most influential proponent that Paul’s theology was dominated by dogmatically held convictions. For others, Paul’s letters contain statements that show his failure to fully show and let go of fundamental distinctions, base on the keeping of Jewish law, between Jews and gentiles within the church (Romans 9 24,27-29; 11:1-10, et seq.). Others argue that he was not a systematic thinker. Still Paul others are unconvinced that Paul was a theologian at all and that the apostle had not fully worked out the impact of his conversion and prior Jewish convictions. Regardless of Paul’s short comings,

Thielman ultimately recognizes an emergent quality regarding “*a coherent and passionate theologian*.”

Thielman strongly suggest that whether Paul’s theology changed over the course of his letter writing career or that he had not worked out his theology seems unlikely. His broadside thesis sets forth the maturational development of Paul’s theology and convictions. Paul had been converted between thirteen and sixteen years before he wrote his first extant letters. And Thielman buttresses the thesis by stating that in the maturation period, Paul’s theology had not reached maturity in all areas, but the basic structure seems to be firm. Thielman treats statements and theological contradiction on a *vanishing bubble hypothesis*. A number of arguments and propositions have been set forth that Paul’s contradictions and theological commentaries *are merely rationalizations of instinctively held convictions*. His second position of support comes on statements which *appear to be* contradictory, when close examination, the situation that Paul is addressing in each instance reveals that no contradiction actually exists (the bubble burst). Heikki Raisanen believes that Paul contradicts himself on the subject of whether Jewish rejection of the gospel hinders or advances the proclamation of the gospels to the gentiles. In 1 Thessalonians, a particular passage (sic) (uncited), shows that the Jews are violently opposing Paul and physically preventing him from preaching the gospels to the gentiles. In Romans 11:11-32, he claims that Jewish rejection of the gospel facilitates the gentile acceptance of it (an interesting thesis). Again, in the Roman passage, he demonstrates that the *Jews failed to believe the gospel; that means that the gospel can go to the gentiles*. Physically hindering the gospel is not the same as refusing to believe. Paul is simply responding to two different ways to two different situations.

The Non-Pauline Letters and the Revelations of John

There are nine texts which comprise the Non-Pauline Letters and the Revelations of John. Their epistolary features are varied as well as the genre. The strands within do not lend themselves to a cohesive theological plait and harmony as the fourfold gospels and other Pauline Letters. Whether the full canopy of *New Testament Theology* is achieved is inconclusive at this juncture.

In the previous two divisions, the historical and the canonical approach offered an approach to reach theological unity and harmony. In the latter division, the evolutionary approach, somewhat historical by implication, shows the early church as a *community of believers who evolved into a structured institution*. Hence, early Catholicism and contrasting (although Thielman does not use the term), *Messianic Judaism*. One can very readily note upon reading the central eschatological concerns of the early church as it evolves not only in structure, but a gradual thrust away from eschatological concerns towards *maintenance and changes in the paradigm of faith*. Also note must be made on the side of Paulinism with the emphasis on justification by faith and Jewish Christianity, embodied in the Apostle Peter with emphasis on the necessity of keeping the Mosaic law and Jewish participation. It is thus said that by the time of Irenaeus in the late Second Century that the Catholic Church had emerged from a kind of struggle between two great forces which represent a compromise or synthesis between them.

The model and philosophical template of historical and evolutionary changed adopted by several scholars, including Ferdinand Christian Baur of the “**Turbigen School**”. Also the analytical model from George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who conceives of history (**phenomenologically**) as an evolutionary progression and process having a dialectical nature i.e., a force (**thesis**), then the emergence of a reactionary force (**antithesis**) and finally a resultant defining outcome (**synthesis**). The latter, of which, becomes a new thesis. Baur certainly differed from Hegel, but he adopted the basis philosophical approach for his description of early church history. Accordingly, the early church engaged in an all consuming struggle.

Even the meaning of the word “*faith*” now shifts from a *life changing decision based on a personal encounter with the proclaimed Word to a set of doctrines and dogmas regarded by the church authorities as correct teachings with without scriptural support*. Ernst Kasemann, a student of Rudolph Bultmann, suggested an idealistic notion, derived ultimately from Hegel that Christian history moves forward by means of a series of conflicts and synthesis. Thus notions that Christian history moves in stages from a period of *fervent eschatological expectations* to a period of bourgeois (wealthy ruling class).

For Bultmann and Kasemann, Christianity moves forward in a neat sequence from one development phase to the next; the fervent eschatological expectation of the earliest community gives way to a period *in which the fervent eschatological expectation disappears*. The question arises as to whether one can maintain a cohesive and harmonious New Testament theology in the dimension of doctrinal, technological, scientific and paradigmatic change?

Thielman’s *Theology of the New Testament* does not address this question, particularly in light of *process theology*. He does, however, achieve for the time some theological unity of the New Testament seeing the human phenomenon and God’s answer to the centrality of Jesus. Accordingly, there is universal rebellion as the reason for Jesus’ rejection; and the death of Jesus defeats rebellion against God. Yet, Jesus’ death atones for human sin and defeats malevolent powers. Faith is a response to God’s gracious initiative and forms the focus on God. Faith, further has an eschatological character and serves as an act of obedience. The Spirit is the eschatological presence of God’s presence with people. Spirit further directs the church and teaches the church, dissolving ethnic barriers and sanctifies God’s people. The church is Israel restored and a dwelling place for God’s presence as well as a repository for truth. The church is the hope of the new creation with the centrality of the Christ as the vision and framework of New Testament theology. In Thielman’s own words:

In the death of Christ, both human and cosmic rebellion against God was unleashed with full force . God used this moment of extreme rebellion , however, to accomplish his purposes. It is through that death and the accompanying events of Jesus resurrection, ascension and the

heavenly session of God's right hand, God began to reconcile his people to himself and sealed the fate of all demonic forces. God did all This, moreover, as his own initiative and as an act of grace and love.

Postscript

Theology of the New Testament is a tremendous step towards New Testament Theology, imperative reading for both student and scholar alike and a reminder for all of us that our mission is not complete but in the process of perfection.