WHAT IS NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY?
SOME REFLECTIONS

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Few who remember Cambridge theology between the wars are likely to question the outstanding significance of Sir Edwyn Hoskyns's lectures on the Theology and Ethics of the New Testament. "It is no dishonour to the Divinity Professors to record how men, and women, came to Cambridge for the sake of Hoskyns." Hoskyns died, still a young man, in 1937; I had the good fortune to hear him lecture in his last year, 1936-1937, and then, and later, to be supervised by his pupil, Noel Davey, perhaps a more profound though less extrovert theologian than Hoskyns himself. I can bear witness to the truth of a further remark contained in Charles Smyth's Memoir, which I have already quoted. "You may generally recognise a pupil of Hoskyns by the fact that, when he says 'theology', what he means is 'New Testament theology'" (p. xx). I need not say that this does not mean that either Hoskyns, or his pupils, were unaware of the existence, and the significance, of other subdivisions of the total theological undertaking: Systematic Theology, Philosophical Theology, Moral Theology, and the like. The translator of Karl Barth, even though it was the Commentary on Romans that was translated, and at a time when the Kirchliche Dogmatik had scarcely begun to appear, is hardly likely to have continued in ignorance of the discipline of Dogmatics, even if he had known little about it to begin with. The fact is rather that in Hoskyns's hands New Testament theology was so fascinating, absorbing, exciting, that most of us, though from time to time we had to turn our attention to other fields, knew that the New Testament was the one area in which we had to work. After 42 years the fascination and the excitement remain.

"When he says 'theology', what he means is 'New Testament theology'." But what does he mean when he says "New Testament theology"? I do not recall that Hoskyns ever told us. Perhaps it was enough that wherever you opened the New Testament, whether at the Synoptic Gospels, or Paul, or 2 Peter, you found that it was talking theology; but that will scarcely suffice for a definition of a fundamental department of theological study. It is a curious fact, indicative, it may be, of nation-
al characteristics, that English-speaking, and especially English, theologians, though they have not been unmindful of the theology of the New Testament, have produced very few "New Testament Theologies". I must myself confess that though I have for many years lectured on the theology of the New Testament it is only recently, and in part under the stimulus of younger scholars, such as, notably, Robert Morgan, not to mention friends and colleagues in other countries, that I have come to ask myself what New Testament theology is. Hence this paper, which is no more than a groping towards an answer to the question that it poses.

New Testament theology as a separate discipline is a relatively new department of theological study. Through most of Christian history theologians have taken it for granted that theology that was not biblical could not be Christian; at the same time they have recognized that the task of theology was not completed by the repetition, or even the rearrangement, of the words of Scripture. Athanasius, for example, in defending the use of such unscriptural terms as εἰς τὴν ἀλήθειαν and ἀποκάλυψις, declared that it was the business of the bishops in council to "collect the sense of the Scriptures", and collecting evidently included repacking the material in new bags bearing new labels. The substance of the scriptural message had to be collected from the various places in which it was expressed and re-expressed in a new terminology suitable to the controversies and to the philosophical habits of speech and mind of the age. But this did not mean that theology was divided into two distinct operations, biblical theology and dogmatic theology. It is arguable that in the Middle Ages there was a tendency for the biblical element in Christian thought to diminish and for the non-biblical philosophical element to increase, for the dogmatic tail to wag the biblical dog. It would be wrong, indeed ludicrous, to claim that theologians such as Anselm and Thomas abandoned the final authority of Scripture, but it is certainly true that the Reformation rested upon a reassertion of this authority and a critical application of it: if current ecclesiastical practices and current ecclesiastical thought were not consistent with Scripture, so much the worse for them; they must be abandoned or amended. Sola Scriptura, as a critical principle, was not new; at least, Scriptura was not new. But it was enforced with a new rigour, and discovered to be creative as well as critical. This however did not establish Biblical Theology as an autonomous branch of theological study. It was reasserted that all theology must be fundamentally biblical, and the effect of this was rather to suppress than to encourage a special activity of biblical theology.

It is not to the period of the Reformation but rather to...