
New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ is a significant attempt at providing a comprehensive account of the theology of the New Testament as a whole. This volume represents the fruit of years of teaching at the seminary level, fully displaying Schreiner’s interest in the theological side of biblical studies.

A vexing methodological question when attempting to write a New Testament theology is, “How does one write a New Testament theology?” There are two broad options. The diachronic approach treats each writing or corpus separately and then moves forward either chronologically or canonically in a book-by-book fashion (e.g., I. Howard Marshall). The synchronic approach, on the other hand, orders the discussion around a central theme or concept and then relates the various writings to that overarching framework (e.g., Donald Guthrie). These approaches are not absolute. Rather, they overlap at a number of points. For instance, the former usually contains some thematic elements, and the latter sometimes moves systematically through sections of the New Testament.

Schreiner opts for the latter. He aims at a thematic approach that seeks to do justice to the “timeline” of salvation history. He argues that “the coherence and the unity of NT theology are explained more clearly if a NT theology is presented thematically” (p. 10). This decision produces a holistic New Testament theology rather than a series of individual New Testament theologies—“none of the NT writings contains the whole of what is taught in the NT” (p. 13). Schreiner also believes that a thematic approach is particularly needed in light of the Western world’s aversion to meta-narratives. Thus, the possible reductionism inherent in a synthetic approach is “a risk worth taking” (p. 11). Furthermore, he “rejects the claim that there is one correct way to write a NT theology,” arguing that no work of theology will ever “do justice to the complexity and beauty of the NT” (p. 10).

Schreiner’s thesis is: “NT theology is God-focused, Christ-centered, and Spirit-saturated” (p. 23). Consequently, his work seeks to expose “the centrality of God in Christ in the concrete and specific witness of the NT as it unfolds God’s saving work in history” (p. 23). In other words, Schreiner argues that the thrust of the New Testament demonstrates that “God will receive all the glory for his work in Christ by the Spirit as he works out his purpose in redemptive history” (p. 23). For him, “the grounding theme of NT theology is magnifying God in Christ” (p. 120). His goal is to demonstrate this reality inductively at the individual book and holistic levels.

In this scheme, the Old Testament represents the promise of God’s salvation. The storyline of the Old Testament concludes with a “promise of redemption” that “informs the OT story and the NT witness as well” (p. 24). The New Testament, in turn, announces the fulfillment of God’s saving promises in Jesus, the Christ. The fulfilling of the promises of the Old Testament is a firm reality for the New Testament authors, yet there is also a sense in which there are still elements of the fulfillment that are yet to come. Thus, the “already-not yet” construct is crucial for Schreiner’s framework. Indeed, Schreiner frequently renders the judgment that “here we do not have an either-or but an already-not yet” (p. 33). In the introduction, Schreiner surveys the New Testament documents and proposes that “an inaugurated but unconsummated eschatology is pervasive in the NT” (p. 25). This way of
understanding the nature of promise and fulfillment along the timeline of salvation history is crucial for understanding Schreiner’s theological formulations throughout this volume. He argues strongly that “no one can grasp the message of the NT if redemptive history is slighted” (p. 14). The goal of God’s plan of redemption is that “he would be magnified in Christ, so that his name would be honored” (p. 14).

Schreiner divides his work into four main parts. In part one, he examines the fulfillment of God’s saving promises and emphasizes their markedly already-not yet orientation (chapters 1-3). For Schreiner, the New Testament authors convey this reality by utilizing a variety of images. For instance, the kingdom of God in the synoptic gospels and the concept of eternal life in John’s gospel demonstrate that the salvation effected by Christ has been inaugurated, but not fully consummated. The fullest consummation awaits the return of Christ in the ensuing eschaton.

In part two, Schreiner shifts focus to “the God of the Promise,” which entails the saving work of the Father, Son, and Spirit (chapters 4-13). In this Trinitarian structure, Christology is most prominent. An obvious but sometimes overlooked theme, the first chapter of the section focuses on the centrality of God in the New Testament. The next eight chapters then survey the person and work of Christ. Schreiner first highlights the “centrality of Christ” in the Gospels by outlining the panorama of ways the Gospel writers understand his identity. For example, Jesus is the new Moses, the coming prophet, and the true wisdom. Schreiner then explicates the diverse titles attributed to Jesus in the Gospel narratives. He is the promised Messiah, the Son of Man, the Son of God, the Great I Am, and the living Word. His sacrifice on the cross and subsequent resurrection are the basis of his saving work of redemption. Paul and the writers of the General Epistles take this “Christology worked out in narrative form” (p. 305) and draw out its implication and significance for the churches. An extensive survey of the person and work of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament rounds out the section.

In part three, Schreiner investigates what it takes for the people of God to experience the promise, namely, believing and obeying (chapters 14-16). These topical chapters treat the response to the gospel anticipated by the New Testament authors. Schreiner first shows that “the saving work of God presupposes that human beings need to be rescued from sin” (p. 509). Indeed, the “power and depth of sin function as the backdrop to God’s saving promises” that are displayed in the New Testament (p. 545). In light of this grim reality, human beings are called to faith in Christ and obedience to a life of discipleship. In this context of discipleship, the New Testament presents the role of the Law as having “both continuity and discontinuity with the OT” (p. 617). Recognizing the controversial nature of the discussion, Schreiner argues that the New Testament writers, Paul in particular, “consistently teach that the Mosaic covenant is no longer in force for believers” (p. 672). They also teach that the law pointed to Christ and is fulfilled by him. Thus, the “norms of the law are related to Jesus Christ,” so that the law must be interpreted “in terms of salvation history.” The “law of Christ” that is now in effect in the New Covenant is a “law of love” that anticipates the age to come. In other words, the law is “realized only through the saving work of Christ and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit” (p. 672).

Finally, in part four, Schreiner examines the people of the promise and adumbrates the future of the promise (chapters 17-19). Schreiner argues that “we see in the NT how in the