Is New Testament Theology Sufficiently Theological?

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Abstract: In this essay, I assess contemporary New Testament Theology against six values or aims of academic theology as espoused classically by St. Anselm and, recently, by Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen. I find New Testament Theology to excel in the first three, with contributions being coherent, historical, and engaged with contemporary contexts. It is with the second three theological trajectories—being confessional, constructive, and collaborative—that I find some standout hopeful examples that, should they become ubiquitous within the disciple, would lead to New Testament Theology becoming sufficiently theological and ultimately, would help to collapse the divide between biblical studies and theology altogether.

Keywords: theology; constructive theology; biblical studies; hermeneutics; Christian tradition; doxology; Old Testament; New Testament; interdisciplinarity

1. Introduction

“Is New Testament Theology Sufficiently Theological?” First, let us dispense with the obverse question: “Is theology sufficiently biblical?” No, it is most certainly not. Rather than cataloging a litany of abuses, it is more economical to just assert that academic—and even evangelical—theology studiously avoids sustained engagement with canonical texts. The reasons for this disappointing pattern are legion, but for our purposes, the simple fact that theology does not usually deign to reach across the aisle gives us a reason to acknowledge and appreciate that New Testament Theology (NTT) is at least making an effort and with excellent results. As attested elsewhere in this issue of *Religions*, there are now “theological commentaries”, series in which authors self-consciously attempt to make theological—and not just historical-critical or history of religions—contributions. Even if they do not always attain the lofty goals they set for themselves, they exist when just twenty years ago, they did not. Therefore, it is with appreciation and optimism that I argue here that, no, NTT is not sufficiently theological, but it is a “No, not yet” rather than a “No, abandon all hope ye who enter here”. What follows are the humble and appreciative recommendations from a Bible-loving theologian to New Testament Theology: three theological trajectories wherein NTT is sufficiently theological and then three recommendations for continued development in otherwise promising directions. NTT is already theologically sufficient with respect to the theological values of coherence, historical and historical considerations, and the ability to converse with contemporary thought and culture. For NTT to become sufficiently theological, it should be more confessional, more constructive, and more collaborative. I will do my best here to avoid getting entangled in biblical studies’ internecine warfare over methodology, but some remarks will be inevitable. I promise to make them only when necessary to advance the goal: a more theological NTT.

2. What Does It Mean to Be Theological?

First, we should offer some justification for the six aforementioned trajectories. Why does NTT need to be more confessional, constructive, and collaborative and not a different set of alliterative objectives? Christian theology has long taken its shape from the prayer of St. Anselm in the first chapter of the *Proslogion* (Anselm 1965): “But I want to understand...
a little of your truth, which my heart already believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand in order to believe, but I believe in order to understand. For I believe even this: that if I do not believe, I will not understand”. Anselm’s _cri de coeur_ is all the more remarkable today for its intransigence against modernism and critical lenses. Faith first, understanding second. This ordering is not due to fideism but due to the nature of human understanding, which is flawed and in need of aid. Indeed, earlier in the prayer, Anselm confesses that only God’s mercy and grace make understanding possible. Anselm’s prayer has led to the sort of catch-all definition of theology as “faith seeking understanding”.

What is more fascinating is that Anselm’s prayer ends with a bit of theological interpretation of Scripture. Obscured by modern translations, “if I do not believe, I will not understand” is, in the Old Vulgate, a translation of Isaiah 7:9 from the Greek Septuagint. Where Anselm has “I believe” and “I understand”, the Septuagint reads in the second person plural as Isaiah is transmitting an oracle from Yahweh to King Ahaz and his people. In context, things look bad for the southern kingdom of Israel. The northern kingdom is now allied to the Assyrian empire, and that empire seeks Jerusalem’s destruction. In verse four, God essentially tells Ahaz, “Do not panic! Relax!” Keep trust in God, Ahaz; that is the main thing. God will deal with your attackers; their schemes will fall apart. The Septuagint’s reading of verse 9 shows the key to remaining calm when Ahaz lacks control and events are too much for him: “If you believe, you will understand”. Ahaz will not understand much, but if he believes, he will understand enough. Enough to continue, enough to move forward, enough to make sense of what is happening now. Ahaz will get a better sense of his moment in history, his rule, and his God. He might draw further conclusions about his God and the nation’s future, but that is decidedly not the horizon of God’s promise. God does not promise that faith will lead to a full, unrestricted understanding of life, death, God, and the universe, but it will lead to enough. This is exactly the posture of Anselm’s prayer. I do not wish to understand everything, just enough, just a little bit more. And I must believe if that is to come to pass.

Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen’s recent definition of theology captures, I think, the spirit of the oracle to Ahaz and Anselm’s prayer: “[Christian theology is] an integrative discipline that continuously searches for a coherent, balanced understanding of Christian truth and faith in light of Christian tradition (biblical and historical) and in the context of historical and contemporary thought, cultures, and living faiths” (Kärkkäinen 2019, p. 2). Humble but expansive, personal but traditioned and historic, conversing across the disciplines. If it stumbles, it is in the relative deprioritization of Scripture, but we should not quibble overmuch; the building blocks of an understanding brought about by faith are most certainly here. First, the discipline is “integrative”, meaning that it incorporates many disciplines. I have renamed this aspect “collaborative” and treated it in Section 9. The definition also mentions “coherence”, which I evaluated in Section 3. As for NTT’s contributions to “Christian truth and faith in light of Christian tradition”, I assessed these elements under “confessional” and “constructive” (Sections 7 and 8, respectively). I treated “the context of historical and contemporary thought” in Section 4. Kärkkäinen’s “contemporary thought, cultures, and living faiths” I examined in Section 5. By applying these six elements of Kärkkäinen’s definition as a rubric of sorts, we can make some determinations about how NTT fares qua theology.

3. Coherentism

By “coherentism”, theology tends to mean something like a web of belief that avoids internal contradictions. This is not a full account of all things; it is rather a recognition that our account of the universe ought to make sense and not depend on cognitive dissonance to hold together. This has not, of course, always been the case in systematic theology, but it is important for offering a compelling vision while retaining some beliefs as essential and non-negotiable and others provisionally. Perhaps it is simply the nature of knowing and using critical biblical studies, but NTT has long been accustomed to, again borrowing
Kärkkäinen’s language, “balancing” New Testament texts that appear in tension, attempting to create a cohesive account of the sort of world to which it attests.

Richard Hays, writing about the use of the Old Testament by the gospel writers, puts the same point this way: “The Gospels offer us four distinctive voices; they do not speak in unison as interpreters of the OT. Rather, we should hear their testimonies as four distinctive voices singing in polyphony. If that is correct, the art of reading the Gospels is like the art of listening to choral singing. . . . To be sure, in a complex choral work, there may be moments of dissonance between the different parts. Discerning hearers do not want to eliminate the dissonances; rather, the task of appreciation is to develop a nuanced ability to hear how the dissonances belong to a larger artistic design” (Hays 2014, KL 2167). Due to the tensions assessed between various New Testament authors (and perhaps even within one author’s own undisputed canon), New Testament theologians are quite adept at developing balanced, critical, or post-critical coherences of disparate witnesses. The goal is not to make Matthew Paul but to show how Matthew and Paul testify in different ways and in different contexts to the same God. And, as with a complicated piece of music, different voices may exist in dissonance while still contributing to the whole of which we can perceive only a part. All of this is to say that NTT seeks to make sense of the universe through Scripture provisionally but does so in a way that is neither naïve nor disingenuous. Since the universe is complicated, it is no accident that the Bible and our interpretations of it are as well, and this is no mark against using Scripture to develop a faith that coinheres and thereby understands. In this respect, NTT and theology are already in, pardon the pun, harmony.

4. Historical Considerations

The words of God to Ahaz have credibility not simply because they are issued from the mouth of a prophet. Rather, they are credible because the God who declares them has a history with Israel, one on which Ahaz can look and reflect. Anselm’s prayer remains optimistic despite every human defect that should render knowledge epistemically impossible because Anselm locates himself within a historical church tradition that has repeatedly seen God grant knowledge. Ahaz and Anselm have history, and that grounds their faith in the face of the future. If anything, NTT has had too much “history”, that is, an understanding of vocation that has seemed at times inextricably enmeshed with “what actually happened” and, as Bultmann attempted to extract a century ago, the “kernel” of religious truth buried beneath the misleading and untrustworthy surface. I commend to the reader Joshua Strahan’s excellent review of contemporary attempts at NTT to see how the discipline continues to wrestle with such a legacy. Recent theological appropriation of historiography suggests that such behind-the-texts attempts at reconstruction and the like are ineradically wrongheaded because they deny the very subjectivity that history-writing—whether ancient or modern—necessarily includes. But even if NTT has at times been overzealous in its historical inquiries, an historical orientation has, among many valuable contributions, recovered the Jewish milieu and worldview of figures like Jesus and Paul.

“The New Perspective” on Paul is itself a fascinating case study in the divide between NTT and academic theology. If ever there was a sea change in exegesis that could or should have had a bearing on the doctrinal commitments of churches in the Protestant tradition, this was it. Much of classic Protestant soteriology hangs on being “justified by faith”, that is, “being declared righteous through my believing in Jesus”. If “justified by faith” actually means “made right by Jesus’s faithfulness to God”, it seems as though some constructive theology might be in order. Does this open the door to universalism? What, exactly, is my role in soteriology? Ironically, after much wailing and gnashing of teeth, New Perspective champion N.T. Wright’s mature position seems to be that, soteriologically speaking, “The Spirit’s work, by producing the faith (pistis) that God has raised Jesus and exalted him as Messiah and Lord, marks out all the people who share that faith as the Messiah’s people” (Wright 2016), KL 64). If there has been a theological adjustment, it is probably in the
sidelining of “forensic” justification and the use of law court metaphors to describe the problem between God and humanity. This is undeniably an advance, but one wonders if much of the theological potential in reading Paul according to his historical context remains unfulfilled. The theologians appear to lack the technical expertise to adjudicate—perhaps even understand—what is happening at the historical and exegetical level, and the New Testament theologians appear to lack the doctrinal expertise to meaningfully engage in constructive thought.

But more on that later. For now, we should be content to recognize that the history component of theology is in good supply in NTT and not only with respect to the first-century ancient near Eastern contexts. Of late, there has even been a recovery of the interpretative methods and instincts practiced by Christian theologians of the past as well as post-critical hermeneutical approaches. If critical biblical studies began in the post-reformation era with all its sloughing off the medieval church and the Fathers, NTT at least has been recognizing the mistake and rectifying it.

5. Contemporary Thought, Cultures, and Living Faiths

With the coming of the information age, theology can no longer be credibly done within a religious and cultural bubble. Where Western theology, since the medieval age, has been the province of European and then North American thinkers, new global contexts demand a mélange of voices. This is not diversity for diversity’s sake; it is instead a brute fact—underground Chinese churches will be doing lay theology because they have no choice—and the result of better understanding of how social location and identity matter in terms of how we perceive God and Scripture. The question biblical studies and theology needed to ask was “What are we missing?”, and the answer turned out to be “quite a lot”. The history of theology in the latter half of the 20th Century and now into the 21st has been the explosion of theologies done from the margins. Beginning with black liberation and feminist theology and now incorporating ecologically sensitive theologies, contextual reflections on the nature of God and the universe have proliferated wildly with astonishing results. Happily, NTT shares this history and predilection. I am not aware of a major New Testament Theology written explicitly from a historically marginalized perspective, but I have no doubt that such a contribution would be welcome.

6. Summary Thoughts

There is a great deal here to like, and it is a credit to NTT that the past twenty or thirty years have made such immense strides. But there is more to do. What about being “integrative” as Kärkkäinen recommends? What about “Christian truth” that has traditionally been formulated in terms of doctrines? If we reassemble these bits of Kärkkäinen’s definition, I think we must acknowledge that theology should be (1) undertaken in praise of the God witnessed in Scripture; (2) limited to a time and a place and located in the life of the believer and the local church and its tradition; and (3) open to advances across the sciences. And I think these are the areas of NTT that need the most growth. As above, I have taken the liberty of terming and ordering them “Confessional, Constructive, and Collaborative”. Let us turn to the first.

7. Confessional

In chapter thirty-six of the first book of On Christian Doctrine, Augustine writes, “So anyone who thinks that he has understood the divine scriptures or any part of them, but cannot by his understanding build up this double love of God and neighbor, has not yet succeeded in understanding them” (Augustine 1995, p. 49). Augustine thought and wrote in a world that had not separated theology and biblical study, so his words here apply to theological reflection as much as biblical interpretation. He has arrived at this conclusion (from our perspective) exegetically and theologically, thinking with the Psalms and John and Paul as he leads up to his pronouncement. For Augustine, when Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life”, he leads us to himself and to the Father and “the Spirit [that]
binds us”, that “cements us together” (Ibid., pp. 47–8). And the purpose of this leading and binding is “so that we can abide in the supreme and unchangeable good”. By reason and Scripture, Augustine has become convinced that all Christian theology and bible study has its proper end in greater love of God and neighbor.9

Only in a context such as ours, where theology and biblical studies have been sundered from their native contexts and subjected to the canons of academic criticism, would Augustine seem radical—but he certainly does. Augustine not only thinks that theology should prompt doxology, but the assumption that he makes getting there is that theology and Bible are for Christians and churches. And the plural “Christians and churches” here is essential; in chapter thirty-five, we are to enjoy those who “together with us can enjoy [God.]” If he is to be believed, NTT ought to increase real Christians’ love for God and each other and spark up communal worship.

This means that NTT must be confessional: written by Christians for churches, bent on generating the worship that springs from the greater love of God and neighbor. So is NTT doing that? My sense is that many New Testament theologians want to be generating love and praise, but they bump up against the reality of academic tradition, the notion that biblical study is meant to be rigorously descriptive and not pre- or proscriptive. An example might help to demonstrate where we are and where we might one day be.

In conclusion to his recent New Testament Theology, Craig Blomberg steps out of the descriptive mode and, as an evangelical should, shares the gospel found in his work. The result is a short treatise of sorts, a call for what he believes Christians ought to do and think in light of what he has found. This has theological promise; here, he could confess his love of God and neighbor. He recalls the results of his work, focusing largely on the themes of filling up or fulfilling the promises of the Old Testament and the high Christology of all the various New Testament texts. The fulfillment aspect, Blomberg thinks, should encourage us: “Once one recognizes how much the concept of fulfillment pervades the NT, both explicitly and implicitly, it is important to point out that not everything that God promised in pre-Christian times has come to pass. Still, the amount that has occurred should be sufficient to engender faith that the remaining unfulfilled promises will yet be kept” (Blomberg 2018, pp. 692–93). Blomberg then laments that this truth has been overlooked in church circles and worries that right/left politics in the West are damaging our unity and future hope. A better way, he thinks, would be for a holistic balance between personal and communal piety, internal love and loving outreach, and the continual recognition that even the best of us are broken and fallible.

These are lovely sentiments, and, in a cursory way, they do direct us to greater wonder at God’s ability to fulfill promises in surprising and novel ways and caution Christians against division. But this massive, erudite work weighs in at seven hundred and sixty-nine pages. The concluding section—in which Blomberg makes an explicit charge to the church—lasts fourteen pages. By contrast, the Modern Author Index by itself is a full ten pages longer. I do not wish to besmirch Blomberg’s achievement by any means; I only wish to point out that if doing NTT is ultimately judged by the way it impacts Christian life and love, the descriptive mode just does not suffice.

As he unpacks various themes in the Johannine literature, Blomberg notes the prevalence of “Son” language to describe Jesus and, in turn, his relationship to the Father. He notes that in John 5, “Son” language can “[sound] like a form of subordination” but, it turns out, has “Jesus mirroring God in particularly lofty ways—by giving life (v. 21), exercising judgment (v. 22), receiving the same kind of honor (v. 23), and even having ‘life in himself’ just as the Father does (v. 26) (Ibid., p. 592). In the very next paragraph, he explains that in Jesus’ Farewell Discourse, “the perichoresis or interpenetration of Father and Son (and also the Spirit) appears, providing foundational material for the church’s development of Trinitarian doctrine”. If theology ought to lead to doxology, it seems like this might have been an excellent opportunity. First, there is a mystery here. Blomberg alludes to the notion that Jesus is both Son and not subordinate to the Father, but what does/can this mean? What does it mean for the messiah to be Son of God and in perichoretic interpenetration
with the Father? If that is what John is teaching us, what sort of God do we have? Second, should we not take a moment to marvel at this vision of the divine? Within this one gospel account, we have a Son and Father who are conceptually distinguishable and yet in full and complete alignment in all things. We have a wholly transcendent Father and a wholly immanent Son who share life and are “one”. Surely this begs comment! Third, if Blomberg is right, what might this intimate union between Father and Son mean for Christian koinonia? Maybe nothing, maybe everything, but theology demands that we at least try for a provisional account.

Now, in Blomberg’s defense, he is writing with at least some of an apologetical aim. He lives in an academic context that has traditionally treated those who locate bin- or trinitarian theology in the New Testament as credulous at best. But, and this is absolutely critical, such a posture might be making Blomberg—and many New Testament theologians—blind to what is and could be there in the text and how that might lift the eyes of readers to the living God to whom the text witnesses. What is more, this is just a single example from a truly monumental text, a text in which Blomberg’s final consideration is “if even a few members of the church of Jesus Christ worldwide capture a glimpse of the vision of the NT for what God’s people are called to initiate and for what they are given the power to become now in this age for the sake of a badly broken world, I will be convinced that I did what I set out to do” (Ibid., p. 704). The Spirit will not be quenched, so I have no doubt that God will affect transformation through Blomberg’s work, but so much has been left on the table! The descriptive mode, the slavish devotion to a historical account of what Mark or Paul or Jesus’s theological vision was, is an albatross, or, more appropriately, a laryngectomy, robbing him of the prayers and rhapsodies and encouragements and injunctions that come so quickly to Augustine’s lips. Again, in his defense, I could easily prosecute an identical case against every NTT released in the 21st Century. The fault is not really with New Testament theologians so much as their training—and even this was not unwarranted. Critical tools do help biblical studies researchers remove the dross and elevate the quality of discourse and have proven immeasurably valuable in providing historical insight. But this only means that we should be careful not to cast aside all critical tools and thus abandon what gains they have made possible.

For NTT to become sufficiently theological, it will have to become more explicitly confessional—and not just in introductions and conclusions. New Testament theologians will have to move from the descriptive to the doxological in a thoroughgoing manner, bearing in mind that their readers are not (or at the very least not only) other academics and future academics but pastors and future pastors and parishioners. The work must reveal God’s beauty and deepen love. And if this requirement does not pass muster with secular academia, that is (or should be) an acceptable loss. The goal is not to earn the praise of people but to inspire the praise of God.

8. Constructive

If theology is to provide a coherent account of things, it must strive to make provisional statements about God and the universe. Historically, this was the work of sacred doctrine, the various dogmas developed by theologians and ratified by the Catholic Church. Following the Protestant Reformation, dogmatics splintered widely and, over time, developed into Christian traditions. Alongside the Catholic and Orthodox, we now have Reformed, Lutheran, Methodist, Anabaptist, Baptist, holiness, evangelical, and Pentecostal/charismatic traditions, each of which have amassed doctrines that jostle one another both within and without the tradition.

So, for example, the Reformed tradition has been at odds with itself over the doctrines of election and omniscience at least since Barth radically reformulated them according to his Christology and reimagined the notion of God’s Being-in-act. So Barthians and neo-Calvinists can square off and squabble over the particulars amongst themselves and then with Arminian Baptists or whomever else. The rubber meets the road, however, when pastors must answer questions from parishioners about whether they are among the elect
and how it is possible to have free will if God’s sovereignty includes knowing the election of the saints from eternity.

I highlight election and omniscience because these happen to be two elements of theology where biblical studies have made welcome and timely contributions. For the former, Part Three of N.T. Wright’s *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* features a substantive construal, even going so far as to mention some of the doctrine’s history in Calvin and Luther and why careful attention to Paul’s thought might set us up for thinking about the election, not in terms of “being chosen” but being chosen “for a particular purpose” (Wright 2013, p. 774, Italics in original). Wright offers a thoroughly reworked understanding of election based on accomplishing a mission rather than populating heaven or hell. This is good constructive work because it addresses real theological questions and points the way forward for how we ought to live. It is, of course, couched in a historical reconstruction of “What Paul really thought”, but it directs a consequential and controversial doctrinal conversation in a particular direction.

If Wright’s discussion of election is anemic, it is only in his reticence to directly address questions about predestination and salvation in classical Protestant doctrine. Wright is hard to pin down here. Maybe he agrees with Calvin about God electing individuals to salvation; maybe he does not. But at least he is able to say that no, Paul does not unequivocally tell us that God has decided on the citizens of heaven from eternity and that there is a better way to read those parts of his letters that have been so interpreted.

In his essay “Does God Have Surprises?”, John Goldingay is very explicit about the philosophical options regarding God’s omniscience provided by theology. He outlines classical theism (God knows all facts) and the challenge of open theism (God knows all facts, but the future is yet-to-be-determined) and then demonstrates how it is that Scripture offers a different view than either. According to the Old and New Testaments, Goldingay thinks, “God is not omniscient about the past or present any more than about the future, but that God can discover anything God wants to know about past, present, or future” (Goldingay 2010, p. 36). Goldingay does have an agenda: he has reservations about the limits and possibility of systematic theology. It is no surprise that he lampoons what is on offer from theology, but it is quite surprising that he offers a constructive alternative. He is not interested in developing a metaphysics or divine epistemology to explain what it is in God’s being that actualizes God’s limited-but-unlimited knowledge or how that might work with and/or against other divine perfections. Still, this biblical theology gives us something to work with, a way to conceptualize what God does or does not know about us and how that might inspire praise and cause us to think about how we should live.

It has implications for perennial questions from parishioners (“Does God have a plan for my life?”), and it invites theology to join the discussion—if this is what God’s knowledge is like, how can we square that with God’s relationship to time? And what is time, exactly? Constructive thinking paves a provisional way forward in which theology and the Bible can work together to develop a coherent account.

Wright and Goldingay on election and omniscience provide two examples of how NTT can be constructively theological without turning into systematic theology themselves. Written from within a tradition, these two offer insights into difficult and contemporary theological questions without shouldering the burden of making final and comprehensive theological pronouncements. Their successors ought to follow the pattern: interpret New Testament texts with the questions of theology in mind. Read texts in ways that creatively and imaginatively address the questions that Christians have about life, death, God, heaven, hell, salvation, creation care, gender, sex, family, Trinity, Jesus, angelic tongues (and, for that matter, angels), the devil, predestination, free will, time, eternity, metaphysics, and everything else that challenge, affirm, or recontextualize classical doctrines in the tradition. And if these successors might desire to do a bit more work to develop a coherent set of beliefs within which such insights might fit, well, that would be even more welcome.
9. Collaborative

Though its coinage has been misattributed to St. Thomas Aquinas, the angelic doctor would surely have agreed that theology is the “Queen of the Sciences”\(^{12}\). Because theology has “eternal bliss” (*beatitudo aeterna*) as its end, it aims at something higher than any other science and thereby occupies the highest place (Aquinas 1952, I.1, 5). But this does not mean that the other sciences are to be ignored or pilloried. Aquinas goes on to defend the use of the lesser sciences such as poetry and what we would think of as the natural sciences in Scripture because “likenesses drawn from things farthest away from God form within us a truer estimate that God is above whatever we may say or think” (Ibid.), I.1, 9). He even interprets Proverbs 9:3 theologically, thinking Lady Wisdom to be theology and the “servant girls” the lower sciences, going into the town and issuing out her invitation to a feast.

His opinion seems to be that theology—“sacred doctrine”—is the greatest joy and deepest insight and the thing to which all other sciences point. And since Scripture ratifies their use, we can expect all realms of inquiry to lead us to it. So either Aquinas was terribly wrong, or something has gone terribly awry because few of the practitioners of the “lesser sciences” think of theology at all, much less a queen. Whether this inversion of the sciences can be rectified remains to be seen, but, as Kärkkäinen noted, if theology is to provide a coherent account of the things that are, it must be “integrative”. As the academy has increasingly atomized, theology has been cut off from other disciplines to the point that physicists and occasionally philosophers—but certainly not theologians—are expected to answer questions about the nature of reality, free will, etc.

Rather than lament the breakdown, theology must go forward by engaging in vigorous conversations with the physical and social sciences—many of which will be one-sided, with theology doing more listening than instructing. And fortunately, or unfortunately, NTT will have to follow suit. Of course, not everyone is or can be a polymath, but the general facility with findings across the disciplines and attention to what is next will be necessary for NTT to fulfill its “integrative” or “collaborative” calling.

While researching his *Body, Soul, and Human Life*, Joel B. Green listened in on graduate-level neuroscience courses to gain competence in what was happening at the frontiers of brain science (Green 2008). Armed with these insights, Green was able to ask fresh questions about old or neglected theological topics. What are we to make of soul language in Scripture? What happens to our theological horizons if and when we take the embodied nature of the mind seriously? After reviewing a spate of findings of the neural correlates of human emotion and cognition, Green observes, “If the capacities traditionally allocated to the ‘soul’—for example, consistency of memory, consciousness, spiritual experience, the capacity to make decisions on the basis of self-deliberation, planning and action on the basis of that decision, and taking responsibility for these decisions and actions—have a neural basis, then the concept of ‘soul,’ as traditionally understood in theology as a person’s ‘authentic self,’ seems redundant (Ibid., p. 45)”. In one fell swoop, classical dualism is put on notice as unnecessary, thanks to neuroscientific research. But rather than leaving a traditional idea deconstructed, Green goes on to exegete the biblical notion of the self and the language of the soul, ultimately concluding that the Hebrew concept is thoroughly unified and embodied—a view very much in keeping with what the neuroscience indicates. And this ultimately spurs theological reflection on the necessity of the sort of physical, bodily resurrection confessed by Paul and other early Christians. If humans have no immortal soul to carry them into the afterlife, only resurrection from the dead can confer life after death. Such reasoning is inherently theological and, perhaps more importantly, invites theology into a conversation about what resurrection life is and why it is essential to Christian confession.

The fruits of interdisciplinarity were extended in 2015’s *Conversion in Luke-Acts*, where Green explains mind-change from the perspective of the narratives of Luke-Acts and neural plasticity. Genuine transformation of thought and behavior has a physical grounding, one that the “lesser sciences” help explain. Green notes that in Acts 2, we see “the centrality
to conversion of the process of incorporation into a new community, which entails a makeover of previous patterns of faith and life into patterns conforming to those of the new community” (Green 2015, p. 132). But this exegetical finding can be understood more deeply in the context of neuroscience. Earlier, he notes, “Borrowing a principle from the neuropsychologist Donald Hebb, known as Hebb’s rule, we know that neurons that fire together wire together—with the result that, over time, our brains make connections on the basis of which we make sense of the present and predict the future in light of past experience” (Ibid., p. 41. Emphasis in original). If this is true, it means that the process of religious conversion may take place over a longer period of time than we might have thought and, moreover, that a community that reinforces certain habits, practices, modes of thought, and linguistic patterns will be essential to it. The community of faith instills a certain type of configuring of the world to which the converted adapt and, in time, adopt. As this configuration—sometimes philosophers of language call it a “horizon”13—succeeds in rendering the world comprehensible, the once foreign concepts and habits harden and become second nature.

The reader will note that Green is doing ecclesiology by collaborative exegesis, that is, biblical theology in the light of the physical sciences. My sense is that many would-be New Testament theologians would like to attempt this sort of collaborative interdisciplinarity but hesitate to do so for fear of straying out of their lane, as it were. Were it not for his graduate studies in the neurosciences, they might think, what right does Green or any other biblical studies scholar have to drift away from their historical-critical bread-and-butter? Well, to be blunt, theology grants that right. Because theology is the attempt to forge horizons within which all learning finds its proper end in the love of God and neighbor, it cannot be limited to critical exegesis. Once New Testament study crosses over into New Testament Theology, different rules apply. Integrative, speculative, boldly creative, and imaginative, these are the modes of theology at its best; unshackle biblical theology that it might embrace them. Doing so does not, as Green’s work amply demonstrates, mean lacking in rigor or abandoning critical excellence. It means, rather, courageously striking out into the unknown, prayerfully expectant that God is pleased to grant a little more understanding, a slightly more coherent, bracing, and comprehensive Christian horizon.

10. Conclusions

“Is New Testament Theology Sufficiently Theological?” No, but it is a lot closer to the mark than theology is to being sufficiently biblical. In many places, NTT is as theological as theology or is at least close to it.

NTT already seeks a coherentist rendering of the voices of the New Testament and, by implication, knowledge of God in general. Close attention to texts and the theological conviction that they are the word of God forces NTT to bring the dissonant notes together to create a complicated symphony.

And NTT is certainly no stranger to historical research and uncovering the voices of the tradition. As theological interpretation shifts its methodology to become more inclusive, NTT is increasingly interpreting Scripture according to many canons but is not by any means abandoning the historical. Christianity is, after all, a historical religion that makes historical truth claims. NTT has done very well to ground those claims.

The discipline continues to become more inclusive. Historically marginalized voices now have the opportunity to speak, producing critical and constructive interpretations of biblical texts. There are surely more voices to hear, but I am confident that biblical studies publishers are ready and willing to promote them. Both theology and NTT have recognized the need for all Christians to participate in constructive work. In these areas, theology and NTT are walking hand in hand and appear to share the same destination.

There is more division, however, when it comes to the confessional, constructive, and collaborative values so prized by traditional and contemporary Christian theology. And in each of these, we have seen the desire and the attempt to do NTT more theologically. NT theologians do want to invite doxology and greater love for God and neighbor, but the
actual execution of that goal often falls short. The solution is to remember that theology begins, as Anselm shows us, as prayer—not an impressive academic feat.

At least within the broadly reformed tradition, we saw how N. T. Wright and John Goldingay are explicit about speaking to traditional theological categories such as election and omniscience. While neither is as coherent or doctrinally direct as theology can and should be, both point the way forward by boldly interjecting the Bible into classical theological controversies. Now we need to move to other subjects: trinitarianism, soteriology, glorification, etc. When NTT is not speaking to the real questions of Christians, it is not sufficiently theological.

Lastly, we saw that collaboration with the other domains of academic research is essential for theology to provide integration, showing how all human learning ought to end in the enjoyment of true divinity. Joel B. Green’s extensive interaction with the neurosciences offers a template for how NTT might begin interdisciplinary conversations that lead to theological work. And though it may seem like a foreign endeavor, this shows that NTT can and must let the other disciplines speak if we are to present a fresh, contemporary understanding of how biblical texts witness the truth of human life.

Be more confessional, be more constructive, and be more collaborative. In Romans 11, Paul is convinced that the inclusion of the gentiles into the people of God through Jesus the Messiah will make Israel jealous. He hopes that his own ministry will inspire this envy, that unbelieving Israel will look at the spiritual riches God has poured out on pagans and recognize what God has done in and through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and the giving of the Spirit. As a theologian enamored of biblical studies, I view NTT in much the same way. Contemporary theology has its bright points, but it remains relentlessly unbiblical. Perhaps by being more confessional, constructive, and collaborative, NTT will bring spiritual riches to the church in such a way that theology will reawaken to the power and possibility of Scripture. When the church hearkens not to theology but instead to the voice of biblical theology, perhaps theology will grow jealous and yearn to feast once again on the Scriptures that point to the Word of God. And someday—likely far off, but who knows? The Spirit blows where the Spirit wishes—there will no longer be any divide between theology and biblical studies at all.

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Notes

1 Hopefully, just one example will suffice: (Sanders 2021), in his study, claims the need to hew close to Scripture when doing trinitarian theology but also suggests that “the overall trend of modern biblical scholarship has been toward a severe attenuation of the traditional exegetical arguments by which the doctrine of the Trinity was crafted and by which it has been supported since patristic times”. Moreover, “[biblical studies] also tends toward fragmentation and a kind of textual atomism, which makes the trinitarian construal of Scripture impossible” (p. 75). Following this counsel of despair, the reader will not be surprised to learn that Sanders’s otherwise impressive work features almost nothing in the way of textual engagement with Old or New Testament texts.

2 The landmark text (Quine and Ullian 1978) proposes a coherentist epistemology. We apprehend knowledge about the world by first possessing a “web of beliefs”, in which the most cherished and assured beliefs occupy the center. These are rarely questioned and form the core of our understanding of the world. More peripheral beliefs are held more tenuously and are more open to revision. When reality pushes back, as it were, these beliefs must be altered to withstand new empirical data. On occasion, our experiences in the world may undermine some deeply held, cherished beliefs. These encounters threaten the entire web and require a massive reimagining of the universe. Presumably, the right set of beliefs would be internally coherent and adequate to explain or navigate all experiences in the world.

3 See (Heringer 2018, especially chs. 3 and 4)’s “The Construction of History” and “The Theological Interpretation of History”. Heringer shows that historiography is at least as much a construction as it is a description, as authors are consciously evaluating and locating data to develop a coherent story. His work goes a long way towards showing that self-consciously Christian history is possible and need not subscribe to a thoroughgoing naturalism to gain legitimacy. Of course, such a proposal renders “What really happened?” accounts as interesting but unnecessary for NTT.
Coined by (Gadamer 2004), a "horizon" is a person’s (or, in Gadamer’s view, a piece of art’s as well) totalizing conception of how the world is. Interpretation is the process in which different horizons intersect and, in the case of a human interpreter, ideally leaves our horizon expanded. One of Gadamer’s pioneering insights is that this process is aesthethical rather than purely rational, a consequence of being attracted to beauty as much as through judgments.

References

