The Task and Methods of 'New Testament Theology'

1. The original German text of this study began with the following preface:
On 21–23 April 1897 the theological faculty in Breslau held a vacation course for clergy. The following pages contain the lectures which I gave on that occasion. Some of my remarks have been filled out or modified, but on the whole, form and content follow what was said then. The footnotes have been added.

This background should not be ignored in judging the work. It still bears traces of its origin. The large number of footnotes, for example, though not, I hope, more than are required by the subject-matter — more likely there are too few for it — are nevertheless to my taste a defect of form. But to insert their content into the text itself would have required a complete reconstruction, and that seemed to me undesirable.

The fact that my account is sketched out here by way of opposition to the latest textbook of New Testament theology is justified by the prestige of its author and also by the similarity of my critical position to his. Nevertheless, my remarks should not be understood as a formal review of Holtzmann’s book. Even on the issues which are relevant here I have not tried to be complete.

I have had to say a plain ‘No’ to the textbooks of B. Weiss and Byschlag. It is, of course, clear that this is not meant to minimize in any way the merit these men have earned in other fields, but I do want to emphasize the fact.

In this work I have often thought with special gratitude of my friend A. Eichhorn in Halle. Though the occasion may seem to some too trivial to say so, I am still obliged to indicate that with regard to historical method I have learned most from discussion with him. Even though the particular question how to write a New Testament theology has not been one of our topics, I am nevertheless quite clear that without his influence some of what stands here would not have been written, and some of it would have been said differently. At particular points I have remembered some stimulating remark or another of his.

Finally, I may be permitted to insert some of the introductory remarks with which, as the first lecturer, I opened the vacation course:

No one will expect vacation courses to remove the far-reaching tension between clergy and university theology which is characteristic of the present time. This tension cannot simply be accounted for in terms of people’s vices — party passions and ambition on the one side, human conceit and unbelief on the other. It comes, rather, from a more deep-seated historical necessity, namely an inner difficulty in the relationship between the Protest-
yet mean an end to belief in the imminent parousia nor the marking off of a special apostolic epoch, absolutely normative for a long future development.

10. *Das Dogma vom Neuen Testament*, Giessen 1896, especially pp.117ff. Krüger’s observations on the illegitimate influence of this dogma can be multiplied. To give just one example: a lexicon of the New Testament which at most occasionally considers late Jewish and extra-canonical early Christian Greek, does not correspond to the demands of the subject-matter, because the New Testament is not a linguistic island. Such an approach does material damage to the understanding of even the vocabulary of the New Testament, because it ignores material which is important for this understanding. I am also in agreement with Krüger that textbooks on the history of doctrine when they use the later New Testament material only rarely or not at all in their descriptions of faith in the post-apostolic age (cf. Krüger, pp.17ff.). The most striking case of this in Harnack’s *History of Dogma* is that he is not prepared to use the Gospel of John in his presentation.

11. Schleiermacher’s *Brief Outline of the Study of Theology* still remains an admirable book. But what it teaches about, for example, ‘exegetical theology’ has no real basis.

12. Holtzmann, I, pp.24f., nevertheless makes that evaluation determine the limits of the discipline. Of course, in principle he wholly acknowledges the alternative conception and looks to research in the future which will go beyond the New Testament framework. But what are we waiting for? According to Holtzmann’s Foreword (p.8), where he is already arguing with Krüger, we are waiting until the historical viewpoint has won a decisive victory over the unhistorical one on the real battleground, the New Testament. But one may as well ask when this victory will be won as whether it has not already been won. Again, can this shifting of the limits not in itself contribute something to the struggle? Certainly the most important thing is that the fighter himself is able to ‘look beyond’ the traditional confines and to see the New Testament in its historical context. But it will also be very important for this whether or not the boundary of the disciplines forces him to look beyond in this way.


14. Raising to some extent the objections that I reject here, Harnack, *ThLZ* 16, 1886, col.413, says: “The undertaking of ‘doctrinal concepts’ uses the methods appropriate to the utilization of legal texts as sources of law.”

15. So, for example, B. Weiss, p.165.

16. Not even Holtzmann, II, pp.310ff., makes this clear. He speaks quite abstractly about ‘hope as the central idea’. He contrasts this ‘branching off into a future direction’ with the Pauline material in the epistle (p.406). Bayschlag, I, p.406, finds a primitive semi-Old Testament form of doctrinal speech in the fact that the concept of faith is ‘still frequently’ (l) represented by hope or obedience. Holtzmann, II, p.305, also speaks of Hebrews’ confession of hope and *bypomone* (endurance) without considering the situation presupposed by the epistle (10.12ff).

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19. Alongside 'New Testament theology', a special 'history of New Testament or early Christian concepts' would be a valuable and desirable supplement. This would investigate the historical origin of the most important concepts of the New Testament; it would discover the changes they have undergone and the historical reasons for them, and also illuminate their influence. The task has many points of contact with New Testament theology, but is quite different from it.

20. For example, all psychological definitions of faith (act of will or of obedience, receptivity, relationship to hope, believing to be true, etc.) can at once be said to be unimportant. It is also wrong that trust is the essence of pistis according to Paul, even though it is in Paul does include the meaning 'trust'. This interpretation is simply a reflection of the Reformation conception of faith. For Luther faith is essentially fideum and even fideum specialissima, personal certainty of salvation. In his doctrine of justification Luther was concerned with men in the church. For them, the important thing was that what they believed in general was valid for themselves. Paul is more concerned with faith and becoming a believer in contrast to the unbelieving world, and so with the affirmation of a definite content of faith. It is no coincidence that Paul has no interest in the psychological concept of faith. It is also without historical significance whether among the post-Pauline writers one describes faith more in opposition to dicipidia (doubts), another more as believing to be true, yet another more as standing fast or as approaching hope. Even James 2.19 needs only to be noted in so far as we are dealing with the meaning of the passage with regard to justification. James has no special concept of faith, and despite everything, pistis is also a cardinal virtue for him. Very little is important for the post-Pauline concept of faith, except e.g. that pistis becomes fides quae creditur.

21. I am only repeating here what Eichhorn has expounded in exemplary fashion for another area: Die Rechtfertigunglehr der Apologie, Studien und Kritiken, 1887, pp. 416f.

22. See pp. 259ff. Similar examples could easily be added.

23. I must be forgiven for again touching on a theme about which I wrote only recently in a review of Jülicher's Einleitung (Göttinger gelehrte Anzeigen, 1896, pp. 517f.) and Gunkel's Stößung und Chaos (THLZ, 1896, col. 629). But it is relevant here, and meanwhile one can hardly indicate the transgressions of literary criticism often enough. Gunkel's contribution on this subject must again be emphatically noted.

24. A few examples are noted below, n. 31.

25. This is naturally not true of all textbooks.

26. The tendency to emphasize differences and contradictions, even where they are not important, is partly a reaction against harmonization in the interests of dogmatics. This is quite natural, but is none the less itself a kind of dogmatizing.

27. Though I am not thinking of him in what I have written about literary criticism.

28. Deissmann has certain reservations about it.

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29. Compare Holtzmann's judgment on the work, I, pp. 11ff. On the whole I am in full agreement with him, though I do not find the book so 'exemplary' in form as Holtzmann does.

30. In his Introduction, pp. 17ff., Byschlag replies to this objection. He says that it is his aim to translate the language of the New Testament out of its ancient and hence now unfamiliar form into contemporary forms of thought and language. He contrasts this translating with working on the temporal shell. It almost seems as if kernel and shell could not be separated without 'translating'.

31. Do Acts 14.16f.; 17.26ff. necessarily contain 'recollections of the natural revelation in Rom. 1.19f.' (l. p. 439)? When Acts 15.12 has Christ's sonship beginning with his exaltation, is this the effect of Rom. 1.4 (ibid.)? How far is it necessary to acknowledge a Pauline background for the picture of Abraham in Heb. 6.13-18; 11.8-19 (lI, p. 306)? Was not, for example, Abraham the prototype of faith in Jewish theology, long before Paul? (cf. my Untersuchungen zum I Klemenbriefe, 1891, p. 69, n. 2; 71, n. 4. Passages like I Mac. 2.52: 'Was not Abraham found faithful in temptation, and it was reckoned unto him for righteousness?') would undoubtedly be considered Pauline by Holtzmann if they stood in the New Testament. So would those which he himself has cited in II, p. 340, n. 4; p. 342, n. 1.) The Johnniane dorea (glory) is said to be partly explained by II Cor. 5.7ff. (lI, p. 432); the synoptic narrative of the transfiguration 'would not be there without this Midrash on the shining face of Moses as he came down the mountain' (I, p. 442; the Handkommentar on Mark 9.2ff. the Old Testament colouring of the transfiguration narrative from this). The Johnniane text monogens (only-begotten) is said to go with the idis huios (only Son) of Rom. 8.32 and even with the use of the word at Luke 7.12 (II, pp. 453, 426ff.). When the Johnniane Christ pronounces a 'confession of his own sinlessness' at 7.18 and 8.46, this happens 'following' II Cor. 5.21 (ll, p. 445). When Jesus was credited with sinlessness by the apostolic church in the first place, 'the occasion for this could be found in sayings where he warned against judging other people (Matt. 7.1f. = Luke 6.37), whereas he knew himself to be qualified to participate in the future judgment (Mark 8.38; 13.27, etc.)' (I, p. 269). I think that accounting for an idea like Jesus' sinlessness by a kind of deduction from individual sayings was an unfortunate notion. And we must make a clean break with the conception that Paul is the actual source of whatever afterwards is reminiscent of him, and that those who came later always had Pauline passages in their head and had meditated on them.

More instances of this nature could be cited. But the individual errors are not very prominent in the work as a whole. What has to be emphasized here again is the way in which they bring literary comparison as such, and the method associated with it, into the foreground. Consider, for example, a part like the section on Ephesians. The numerous minute comparisons between Ephesians and Colossians and other Pauline epistles might be justified in the treatment of a problem of critical introduction. But what are they doing in a biblical theology? Similarly, to show that Pauline conceptions are echoed in the Gospel of Luke is really of little more interest to a history of early Christian belief than evidence of Schleiermacher's influence upon some third-
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The description of Jesus he devotes a separate chapter to the ‘theological problems of early Christianity’. True, he deals here first only with the faith of the earliest Jewish Christian community, and even there sticks far too closely to the literary point of view (cf. the characteristic transition in I, p. 349: ‘We first turn to a second work of the author who wrote to Theophilus (Acts), and at the same time to the synoptic gospels so far as they . . . come into consideration as books of prayer and teaching’; also the special sections on Mark, Matthew, Luke-Acts and the Apocalypse, I, pp. 419–76). But in many ways he goes beyond the earliest community and deals with a whole series of themes in a historical manner, drawing in a good deal of material. There is systematic consideration of the doctrinal narrative in the gospel, and of theological concepts like pre-existence, supernatural birth (why not also Jesus’ receiving the spirit at his baptism, which is closely related to this?), ascension, descent into hell; also baptism and Lord’s supper, gnosticism in the New Testament, the ‘new law’ and so forth. These parts are perhaps the most valuable in Holtzmann’s book. No one will read them without profit and enjoyment. But he has not made much more than a start. Many other themes should be dealt with in this way. Often it is only the necessary historical observations that are given, and these only sketchily, and they are still too much influenced by literary perspectives, as already noted. The corresponding first sections of Harnack’s History of Dogma may also be recalled here. They are perhaps not the most useful parts of the great work, but more stimulus and real ‘biblical-theological’ understanding can be got from them than from complete textbooks of New Testament theology.

41. Cf., however, in addition, below p. 107.
42. Cf. above n. 32.
43. Holtzmann, II, p. 317, calls them ‘doctrinal specialities’ of the epistle.
44. The first part of von der Goltz’s monograph on Ignatius (Texte und Untersuchungen, xii, 1894) confirms this in some respects.
45. Beyerlag, I, p. 22, argues for a ‘certain accommodation between a chronological arrangement and one by subject matter’.
46. Holtzmann, I, p. 27. Deissmann (p. 136) recommends putting the contents of the smaller New Testament writings as appendices after each of the three main formations; synoptic (?), Pauline and Johannine Christianity. Thus James should follow the synoptic material. This shows that he is at a loss to know what to do.
47. Lest a literary label (pseudo-Paulinism, Catholic Epistles) which says nothing about the actual content of the epistles should become normative. Cf. Holtzmann himself, II, p. 316.
49. A trifling (though in fact slightly questionable) observation of Holtzmann, II, pp. 233f., seems to me typical. The formula of Eph. 6.23, ‘peace and love with faith’, is said to be half way between Gal. 5.6, ‘faith working through love’, and I Tim. 1.14, ‘with faith and love’. This is logically correct, if one thinks about the Pauline piste. But it is not historical. The development onwards from Paul cannot be imagined as though faith had first to lose a part of its specially Pauline significance before love could come in as a formal equivalent to it.
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50. Making clear what we do not know is also important for a correct evaluation of our positive information.

51. Holtzmann, I, pp. 207f., 359; see also pp. 222 and 547.

52. In fact, of course, this 'puzzle' is rather an argument against the supposition that Jesus thought of a present kingdom in the modern sense. It may be added that although he must have felt his spiritual conception of the kingdom to be something new, he never, so far as the sources (including Luke 17.21) show us, indicated that he understood the concept of the kingdom any differently from his contemporaries. That is still significant, even if what it means is only that the evangelists were no longer conscious that Jesus was the sort of innovator they show him to have been. Holtzmann has failed to make us aware of this difficulty. He has not really fitted Jesus' concept of the kingdom into the development from Judaism to the early Christian community at all.


54. See above, p. 88.

55. See also von der Goltz, p. 171. Holtzmann has some relevant comments against this, II, pp. 582, 584.

56. For example Beyschlag, I, pp. 4, 17f., is also correct here.


58. That is, in fact, easier to imagine in Paul than in Luther and his followers. Paul can write at I Cor. 7.19: circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing; but (what matters is) keeping the commandments of God. In I Cor. 13 he can place love above faith and hope. In Galatians he can oppose the significance of circumcision and foreskin with faith working by love. He can also make statements like that at II Cor. 5.10. These are all things which a fastidious protagonist of the Protestant doctrine of justification could never have said on his own and which must worry him a lot. One might add in parenthesis that had these passages come in Ephesians or I Timothy, they would have been seen as clear signs of a deuterou-Pauline or even un-Pauline attitude.

59. How the extensive formulae of Romans are to be explained from this point of view does not belong here. What I have said concides fully with what has most recently been spelled out by P. Wernle, Der Christ und die Sünde bei Paulus, 1897, about Paul's doctrine of justification. Cf. especially pp. 54, 79ff., 92ff., 100, 121. Wernle says that the doctrine of justification was 'mission theology' (p. 79). So far as I can see, Holtzmann has at no point put sufficiently sharply the question how the formula of justification by faith arose. Yet this is a question of the first order for Pauline theology.

60. In a large church where the concepts of brother and neighbour overlap, or at any rate cannot be clearly distinguished, love of the brethren will in the nature of the case always be a 'half-forgotten bit of Christianity' (cf. Rade in Die Christliche Welt, 1892, no. 5ff.). It can only be otherwise in sects, conveicles or fraternities which are in some way exclusive. Love of the brethren cannot be artificially concocted. Although Holtzmann talks a number of times about the relationship of love of the brethren and love of one's neighbour, I can find no historically satisfactory account of it. Compare, for example, II, pp. 21ff. Holtzmann can here say about Paul that the peacableness and compassion, etc., recommended allow 'no more doctrinaire distinguishing between persons to whom this love should be directed. Otherwise even Pauline morality would fall under the judgment of the Sermon on the Mount: "Do not even tax-collectors and sinners do as much?"' The word 'doctrinaire' here contains some misunderstanding, and the saying quoted is somewhat inappropriate. All that is said about the commandment to love in John is (cf. II, pp. 388f.): 'However, that is meant rather differently from the morals of the Sermon on the Mount. . . . It is misleading and distorted to see 'the middle link between Jesus' all-embracing command and John's definite restriction' in Paul.

61. In the section on the theological problems of early Christianity, Holtzmann automatically brings in extra-canonical material at several points.


63. See above, p. 73.

64. I have not brought up the question whether one should take it further, say up to AD 200, and do not need to if it is admitted that the early Christian epoch excites particular interest in an extra-special treatment. But ideally a New Testament scholar should certainly be able to look a little further than Justin.

65. This is well said by Holtzmann, I, pp. 124ff., 127, 134ff.

66. Holtzmann, I, p. 126: 'The contents of consciousness exist as ideas. These begin where a person is aware of something, unite at the point of what is being thought of and then press on to achieve the resulting aims of the will.'

67. See, however, Harnack, History of Dogma, I, p. 89.


69. A similar view is held by Holtzmann, I, p. 350.

70. Consider what was spelled out on p. 100.

71. This gives me an opportunity to return briefly to my sharp criticism of Kablisch, Paulinische Esthetik (ThLZ XIX, 1894, no. 5). I cannot withdraw my objections to the book. But in retrospect I wish that I had recognized more clearly that the strong emphasis upon eschatology in Paul and his connection with Judaism was a corrective to the usual view and performed a useful service.

72. I have in mind approximately the same demarcation as Weizäcker has made (The Apostolic Age) in meeting the conditions of a truly historical presentation, in his extremely sensitive sketch of Pauline theology.

73. The same applies to John.

74. Cf. also Holtzmann, II, pp. 4, 217. Wendt has rightly drawn attention to this theme recently (ZTBB IV, 1894), though I cannot agree with his method and results.

75. The opening words of E. Hatch's posthumous work, The Influence of Greek Ideas on Christianity, 1890, may be recalled here: 'It is impossible for anyone, whether he be a student of history or no, to fail to notice a difference of both form and content between the Sermon on the Mount and the Nicene Creed. The Sermon on the Mount is the promulgation of a new law of conduct; it assumes beliefs rather than formulates them; the theological conceptions which underlie it belong to the ethical rather than the speculative.
side of theology; metaphysics are wholly absent. The Nicene Creed is a statement partly of historical facts and partly of dogmatic inferences.

The contrast is patent. If anyone thinks that it is sufficiently explained by saying that the one is a sermon and the other a creed, it must be pointed out in reply that the question why an ethical sermon stood in the forefront of the teaching of Jesus Christ, and a metaphysical creed in the forefront of the Christianity of the fourth century is a problem which claims investigation. It is a long way from Paul to the Nicene Creed. But if one asks on which side of this contrast he mostly stands, who will be able to reply without hesitation: on the side of the Sermon on the Mount?

76. That means the same as a great distance in time and space from him.

77. In a section which forms one of the high points of his work ("Rückblick und Ausblick", II, pp. 203ff., and closely related to it, I., pp. 490ff.), Holtzmann has made some very valuable remarks about this, but they could be supplemented.

78. The Pastoral Epistles mean to be Pauline. If, however, the Paul they honour is not so much the real Paul as rather their Paul, i.e. the perfect representative of normal church orthodoxy, it is less a matter of the after-effects of Paul than of an appearance of this (but see Holtzmann, II, p. 259).

79. Harnack, op. cit., p. 89; Pfeiderer, Das Urchristentum, pp. 615ff. (ET Primitive Christianity, II, pp. 237ff.); Holtzmann, II, p. 205. Here, too, the fact that the Pauline gospel is conditioned by the individual is recognized.

80. This does not, of course, exclude the possibility that Hellenistic Jews played an important role as teachers of Gentile Christians.

81. Pfeiderer, p. v (reference to German text).

82. See pp. 696, 672: Chapter 9 of Pfeiderer's Paulinism (ET 1877, II, pp. 51ff.) is entitled "Paulinism under the Influence of Alexandrine Philosophy"; see pp. 54, 77ff.

83. Harnack, p. 12: 'Understanding history means finding the norms by which the phenomena are to be classified."

84. Holtzmann is very good on this, I, pp. 308ff.; also on several other of the questions mentioned.

85. Although Holtzmann rightly refuses to derive the gospel from the later gnostic systems, nevertheless he, too, considers its world of thought to be influenced and coloured by gnosticism. While agreeing with much of what he says here, I still do not think that he has done enough to make the relationship of the gospel to gnosticism clear. What matters most is making it clear in historical terms. It looks as though the evangelist intentionally gave his conception a background of speculative ideas from gnosticism. Or else he means by his book to lead false gnosis back to the truth it contains (II, pp. 381, 386).

How can that be imagined? There is also no indication of how terminology and fundamental ideas can betray a gnostic origin and yet the author (in 1 John) oppose gnosis.

86. To use Holtzmann's appropriate expression, I, p. 165.

87. As with Paul, the task of dealing with the whole more exhaustively can be left to monographs.

88. Consider what impression we would have of the theology of Ignatius if we had from him not letters, but a gospel.

89. Other writers who say nothing about these erga will also, of course, have appealed to them in opposing Jews and Gentiles.

90. He saw to the wine at the wedding, not because his mother asked him; he does it of his own accord. He ignores his brothers' challenge to go to Jerusalem (ch. 7), but then sets out of his own accord. He lays down his life of his own free will (10:18) - and so on.

91. The evangelist had no doubt already read his own picture of Christ in the gospels which he knew, and consequently did not so acutely as we do how much he (or his like) had given new colours to the traditional picture of Christ. It is equally certain that the gospels he possessed did not satisfy him and were insufficiently clear.

92. They are also very different from the themes of Hebrews, which also has something to say about the humanity of Jesus. Against Holtzmann, II, p. 414.

93. If these suggestions of mine are right, then although the relevant sections of Holtzmann do largely depict the gospel data correctly, nevertheless some things have to be criticized and modified. This point has also to be considered if we are trying to evaluate correctly the relationship of 1 John to the Gospel. Cf., for example, Holtzmann's statement: 'In any case salvation is more directly tied to a personal relationship with Jesus in the Gospel than in the epistle' - and generally the comment in II, p. 442, n. 3.

94. Am I mistaken in my impression that this is often concealed by the way in which 'the gospel' is paraphrased when it is treated as a factor in the development? By gospel, people do not actually mean what the New Testament calls gospel - the message of the imminent kingdom of God or future salvation - but the quintessence of Jesus' ethical and religious preaching - i.e. primarily the 'law'.

95. Beyerbach can write (I, pp. 24f.): ['The early Christian'] doctrinal development has almost no connection at all with the peculiar teaching of the Judaistic period, etc. Compare the whole of this really superficial account. How much more correct he is at II, p. 81.

96. Ibid., pp. 128ff. Cf. on this also the section 'On the Religious Dispositions of the Greeks and the Romans in the First Two Centuries, and Graeco-Roman Philosophy of Religion at that Time', in Harnack, pp. 116ff.

97. In addition to this first task for biblical theology, Deissmann adds two others. To establish, first, the particular individual forms of the early Christian consciousness, and then, secondly, its overall character - i.e. in a kind of systematic summary to get a cross-section and (using the simplest categories, like God, man, sin, Christ, etc.) to show a unity in the variety of the classical witnesses to primitive Christianity. I do not recognize this latter task. This kind of cross-section would only be an abstraction from the real history, and would therefore not make the historical conception any clearer. We are not accustomed to making similar demands for other areas in the history of religion. This is not, of course, to deny that at certain points it is important to define explicitly what they all have in common, although that is not always important. This evidently means that to reproduce the particular individual forms of the early Christian consciousness' is not enough.

98. Deissmann, p. 122.

99. The name of the lecture-course will also have to be changed; Krüger, p. 34.