

## The Theme of the NT

### Introduction

Analysis is easy. Synthesis is tough. Most people know how to summarize a paragraph or a chapter, but devising a statement that reflects a whole book takes greater skill.

The same “synthesis challenge” applies to the Bible. Try it. Without looking elsewhere in this study for help, write a *single sentence* that summarizes the message of the whole Bible:

Now write a sentence summing up the Old Testament:

Finally, try to do the same with the New Testament:

Are you satisfied with your work on the three sentences above? What’s missing? A good overall statement that sums up the theme of the NT will have these elements:

1. *Focuses on God* rather than man (Scripture is theocentric, not anthropocentric)
2. *Consistent with the key OT theme* (both OT and NT are in the same divine story)
3. *Seen as the key teaching of Jesus and Paul* (the two main teachers in the NT)
4. *Broad enough* to reflect each NT book and to unite other minor themes
5. *Narrow enough* to be meaningful (too broad for “God” or “Jesus” to be the theme)

### Attempts to Sum up the Whole NT

A. Salvation: God redeems repentant sinners and brings them into his eternal family. At times, this has been called the “salvation history” approach.

1. Merits: Christ came “to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10; Mark 10:45) as the Savior of the world. This is definitely a key theme as each of the four Gospels records Christ’s death for humanity, and the epistles elaborate on this extensively.
2. Problems: Focusing on salvation as the key theme seems overly focused on man rather than on the God who saves him. Even such a focus on God as Savior still does not express *why* God redeems people.

B. Jesus: He is the Savior prophesied in the OT.<sup>1</sup>

1. Merits: Jesus is clearly the key NT person who fulfilled numerous OT prophecies. Also, sinful man’s main need is for a Savior.
2. Problems: This view also seems too broad, as it lacks clarity about what Jesus has *come to do*. Though the name “Jesus” means “The Lord saves,” it does not say why he saves humanity. Like the salvation theme above, it limits the ministry of Jesus to redemption rather than including other reasons for his coming.

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<sup>1</sup> “The New Testament squarely focuses on Christ. He is the heart of it all. He is the center of the message” (Mark Dever, *The Message of the New Testament: Promises Kept* [Wheaton: Crossway, 2005], 23).

- C. Church: The salvation given to those who believe in Christ makes them his body, the Church. A similar idea is to see the new covenant as the primary theme.
1. Merits: God's new covenant community, the Church, is not found in the OT (Eph. 3:3), so this view also merits consideration as a key theme. The church is clearly God's new covenant (= "new testament") people in contrast to Israel, with whom God made the old (Mosaic) covenant in the OT.
  2. Problems: Like the salvation view, the Church view is also too man-centered.
- D. Glory of God: God's key purpose in all ages is for all creation to honor him as God.
1. Merits: Beginning in Genesis 1, God created the world for his own glory, and He rightfully deserves praise, which he will receive in Revelation 22. Paul says, "Whatever we do in word or deed, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31).
  2. Problems: While also accurate, this view does not show *how* God will glorify Himself.
- E. Kingdom: God restores man to his original purpose to rule over creation through Jesus Christ, who is first and foremost King.
1. Merits: This is likely the best overall NT theme for the following reasons:
    - a) Kingdom is clearly an overarching theme in both testaments, for God created man to rule over creation (Gen. 1:26-27) and will restore man to that original design in the eternal state as man reigns in the New Jerusalem (Rev. 22:5).
    - b) The rest of Scripture, between this first and last chapter, focuses on God extending his rule through Israel in the OT and through Christ and the Church in the NT.
    - c) The kingdom of God is the key message of John the Baptist (Matt. 3:1), Jesus (Matt. 4:17; Acts 1:11), and Paul (Acts 28:30-31).
    - d) The NT kingdom teaching fulfills the OT prophecies about Jesus that emphasize his rule as King (Gen 49:10; Num 24:17; 2 Sam 7:12-16; 1 Ki 17; Ps 2, 72, 110; Isa 2, 11; Dan 7:13-14; Amos 9; Mic 4; Zech 14) more than his death as Savior (Ps 22; Isa 53).
  2. Problems: This view shows *how* God glorifies himself (i.e., by extending his rule to man), but kingdom proponents must take care not to view the kingdom solely from a human standpoint, or it can become too man-centered, as in some of the other views above.

## Conclusion

This brief study aims to synthesize the NT rather than focus solely on various parts. Each view surveyed is a genuine NT theme,<sup>2</sup> but the kingdom best meets the five criteria on the previous page.

In fact, the kingdom also provides a chronological structure for the NT as the kingdom *announced* (Gospels), the kingdom *extended* (missionary journey letters), the kingdom *tested* (letters in the AD 60-80s), and the kingdom *triumphant* (the book of Revelation).

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<sup>2</sup> H. H. Drake Williams, III, *Making Sense of the Bible: A Study of Ten Key Themes Traced Through the Scriptures* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005; Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006).