

The Theme of the NT

Introduction

Analysis is easy. Synthesis is tough. Most people know how to summarize a paragraph or chapter, but to devise a statement that reflects a whole book takes more remarkable 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 parts of the same divine story)
3. *Seen as the key teaching of Jesus and Paul* (the two primary 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 world’s Savior. This is a key theme as each of the four Gospels records Christ’s death for humanity, and the epistles elaborate on this extensively.
 2. Problems: Seeing salvation as the key theme seems too centered on man rather than focusing on the God who saves man. Even such a focus on God does not express *why* God redeems people.
- B. Jesus: Christ is the Messiah prophesied in the OT.¹
1. Merits: Christ is the key NT person who fulfilled numerous OT prophecies.
 2. Problems: This view also seems too broad as it lacks clarity regarding what Christ has *come to do* as Messiah.
- 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 “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).

1. Merits: God's new covenant community, the Church, is not seen in the OT (Eph. 3:3), so this view also has merit 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, this one also is 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 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 an accurate theme, this view does not show *how* God chooses to glorify himself.
- E. Kingdom: God restores man to his original purpose of ruling 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 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 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).
 2. Problems: This view shows *how* God seeks to glorify himself (by extending his rule to man), but kingdom proponents must be careful not to see the kingdom only from a human standpoint, or it can become too man-centered, like some of the views above.

Conclusion

Hopefully, this brief study has helped you synthesize the NT rather than only look at the various parts. All of the views surveyed are genuine NT themes,² but the kingdom best answers the multiple criteria that we noted on the previous page.

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 AD 60s), and the kingdom *triumphant* (letters of AD 70s to the AD 95 book of Revelation).

² 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).