**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 greater skill.

The same “synthesis challenge” applies to the Bible. Try it. Without looking elsewhere on 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:

### *Focuses on God* rather than man (Scripture is theocentric, not anthropocentric)

### *Consistent with the key OT theme* (both OT and NT are parts of the same divine story)

### Seen as the *key teaching of Jesus and Paul* (the two main teachers in the NT)

### *Broad enough* to reflect each NT book and to unite other, minor themes

### *Narrow enough* to be meaningful (too broad for “God” or “Jesus” to be the theme)

# Attempts to Sum up the Whole NT

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

### 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 record Christ’s death for humanity and the epistles elaborate on this extensively.

### 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 still does not express *why* God redeems people.

## Jesus: Christ is the Messiah prophesied in the OT.[[1]](#footnote-1)

### Merits: Christ is clearly the key NT person who fulfilled numerous OT prophecies.

### Problems: This view also seems too broad as it lacks clarity in regard to what Christ has *come to do* as Messiah.

## Church: The salvation given to those who believe in Christ make them his body, the Church. A similar idea is to see the new covenant as the primary theme.

### 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.

### Problems: Like the salvation view, this one also is too man-centered.

## Glory of God: God’s key purpose in all ages is for all creation to honor him as God.

### 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).

### Problems: While also an accurate theme, this view does not show *how* God chooses to glorify himself.

## Kingdom: God restores man to his original purpose to rule over creation through Jesus Christ, who is first and foremost King.

### Merits: This is likely the best overall NT theme for the following reasons:

#### 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).

#### 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.

#### 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).

### Problems: This view shows *how* God seeks to glorify himself (i.e., by extending his rule to man), but kingdom proponents must be careful not to see 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 begin to synthesize the NT rather than only look at the various parts. All of the views surveyed are genuine NT themes,[[2]](#footnote-2) but the kingdom best answers the various criteria that we noted on the previous page.

In fact, 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).

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). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
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). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)