

INTRODUCTION

THE NEW TESTAMENT  
AND CONTEMPORARY  
CHRISTIANITY

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The motivation for writing this book is my belief that the New Testament *is* a fundamental resource for the maintenance of Christian life. While the precise role and status of the New Testament are variously construed among different Christian denominations, all will agree with this. All Christians find in its pages information concerning God's intervention in the world through Jesus Christ and the immediate aftermath of that intervention that speaks directly to the character of their current life and identity and of their ultimate destiny. In this book, I aim to make a particular proposal on how we should read or listen to the New Testament so as to maximize the impact that its twenty-seven constituent documents will have on contemporary Christian existence under God.

From this it is clear that my intention in writing is an avowedly theological one. I wish to promote a specifically Christian rationale for reading the New Testament that is related to its role in speaking of God's ongoing relationship with human beings and with the cosmos.

Taking this line, however, neither entails denying that there are other ways of approaching this work nor denigrating the results of such approaches. Many critics (some Christian and some not) are solely preoccupied with the historical question of what the documents that comprise the New Testament meant when they were first published. Unlike some, I see nothing whatever wrong with this. Much of my own biblical research has been and will continue to be historical in character. Similarly, it is possible to interpret the New Testament documents as literary texts in a way quite divorced from their role in sustaining contemporary Christian life and reflection. Again, I regard that as an entirely valid mode of inquiry. The fact, moreover, that some critics are working on the New Testament outside of a Christian context (for example, within a religious studies framework) should be a cause of celebration, not of anxiety and regret. While the

## 2 NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

New Testament makes particular demands on practicing Christians, they do not own it.

Nevertheless, this book is expressly devoted to the question of how, and how best, we might interpret the New Testament so that its pages are applied to the challenges of contemporary Christian life, experience, and identity. How should we read or listen to the New Testament so that it continues to have a vital role in telling us what it means to be a Christian in the twenty-first century after Christ? As eminent an authority as Heikki Räisänen has recently attacked the idea of exegesis serving the church. In a post-Christian society, he thinks, exegesis should be oriented to the concerns of wider society.<sup>1</sup> While I agree that Christianity should be outward-looking and actively involved with the world, where there are upsurges of great good as well as of great evil, I cannot see a problem in occasionally recalling that the relationship Christians have with the New Testament is necessarily different from that of non-Christians. It speaks to their inmost selves in a way that it does not speak to others and there must be times when we explore more fully what this means. Outlining a particular line of such exploration is my task in this book.

Yet although the proposal that I will make in this book is “theological” in the sense outlined above, I will not be advocating the need for a “theology of the New Testament” in its currently understood sense, let alone suggesting what such a construct might look like. I wish to propose an entirely different model for New Testament theology. Biblical theology, of which the various New Testament theologies constitute a subcategory, was first theorized by Johann Philipp Gabler in 1787 and is still the subject of much attention over two centuries later. Its central idea, as I will explain in chapter 1, is that it is possible for biblical scholars to analyze the Bible historically in order to isolate the key “theological” ideas that (on most but not all views) are then available for use by systematic or dogmatic theologians. This results in “biblical theology,” while the process applied to the Old or New Testaments produces “Old Testament theology” or “New Testament theology,” respectively. The key aspects of this approach should be underlined. An individual scholar applies historical analysis to the texts and derives certain theological ideas from them. Usually this process involves according a central role to some of the material (most commonly the prophets in the Old Testament and Paul or John in the New) and then arranging the ideas hierarchically, thus setting the “more important” ideas above the “less important.” Thus a “theology” is produced.<sup>2</sup> All of this continues an approach Gabler inaugurated in 1787.

The thesis of this book is that the time has come to propose an entirely different way of bringing the results of the historical investigation of the New

Testament into connection with contemporary Christian belief, practice, and identity. It is not part of my aim to criticize the numerous New Testament theologies that exist along the lines just mentioned or the enterprise of producing them. Nevertheless, I will argue that they represent an unnecessarily limited way of relating the New Testament—investigated historically—to present-day Christianity. To illustrate the issue and to set out some of my reasons for charting a different course, it will be useful to consider a recent essay by Robert Morgan, one of the leading authorities on New Testament theology, entitled “Can the Critical Study of Scripture Provide a Doctrinal Norm?”

This essay argues for one way in which New Testament theology can define the shape of Christian belief. Morgan correctly states that biblical and New Testament theology “have their origins and rationale in the assumption that scripture is in some sense normative for Christian belief and practice.” Although he does not consider that Christian Scripture yields “a normative theology,” he proposes, “it is possible to draw from Christian scripture one simple norm by which all subsequent Christian theologies can be tested for their faithfulness to the Christian claim to a decisive revelation of God.”<sup>3</sup> Morgan finds his criterion in the divinity of Jesus. He suggests that every New Testament writer shared the conviction that “in having to do with the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Messiah they have to do with God, the one God of Israel who loves the world as its Creator, Redeemer, life-giver.” He then proceeds to suggest that this doctrinal criterion of Christianity is classically summarized in the four words of the Chalcedonian definition that assert that Jesus is “truly God, truly a human being” (*vere Deus vere homo*).<sup>4</sup> Morgan finds John’s Gospel to be the center of New Testament theology from the perspective of this doctrinal norm, against the view of many others who have marginalized or neglected the theological witness of this Gospel.<sup>5</sup>

I have no difficulty with the norm Morgan articulates to represent the heart of the New Testament’s theological reflection. His advocacy of a fairly high Christology at an early period coheres with the research of others (myself included), even if to some Paul might seem as useful a source here as John.<sup>6</sup> And he and I are totally at one in the overall aim of bringing the New Testament into fruitful encounter with contemporary Christianity. My problem lies in the *utility* of Morgan’s procedure for achieving this end.

Let us recall that he is looking for the historical exploration of Scripture to provide “normative” guidance for Christian belief and practice. Clearly, a “norm” of the sort he has in mind here is equivalent to what he also calls “a measuring rod or canon of truth.”<sup>7</sup> Another way of describing the type of norm in question is as a credal or doctrinal formula.<sup>8</sup> But is there a good reason

to stipulate a norm/canon of truth/credal or doctrinal formula derived from Scripture? Something of an answer is given in his observation that the “doctrinal shape of Christianity is vital because it affects belief, worship, and moral practice.”<sup>9</sup> On a number of occasions in the essay he raises the importance of theology for Christian identity. Thus he claims “doctrinal formulae have served as badges of Christian identity and guidelines for Christian interpretation of scripture.”<sup>10</sup> At one point he even suggests that, in mediating between biblical study and systematic theology, “New Testament theology does not give arguments for the truth of Christianity, as was once expected, but rather helps to clarify its identity.”<sup>11</sup> Perhaps the nearest he comes to explaining what he means by this last remark is when he states that if it is “the heart and center of the New Testament and traditional Christian faith” to insist that, in having to do with Jesus, Christians have to do with God, then “the task of theological interpretation is to *make it plain*.”<sup>12</sup>

I will grant that the clarification of Christian identity, the elucidation of whom we really are when we call ourselves Christians, is of critical importance. It has been at the center of my own thinking about the New Testament for a decade. Yet we must still ask whether, and, if so, in what sense, the “making plain” (which I take to mean the exposition and declaration) of *vere Deus vere homo*, the foundational theological truth to be discerned in the New Testament, can clarify that identity. Unfortunately, Morgan does not explain what he means by “identity.” It does seem, however, to embrace “belief, worship and moral practice.”<sup>13</sup>

That it is possible, however, to have a rich view of the identity shared by members of a group without much interest in beliefs held by the members can be seen in the analogy with social identity theory. This is a branch of social psychology Henri Tajfel, John Turner, and others developed at the University of Bristol in the late 1970s and early 1980s and which flourishes still in the United Kingdom, Europe, and Australasia. It focuses on that aspect of an individual’s identity that he or she derives from belonging to a particular group (= “social identity”), especially in relation to out-groups to which he or she does not belong. The theory highlights three dimensions of group belonging: the “cognitive” (the fact of belonging), the “emotional” (how one felt about belonging), and the “evaluative” (how one rated oneself in relation to members, other groups). Yet this rich theory of identity persisted for twenty years before one of its exponents suggested the possible importance of “group beliefs” as an expression of group identity. This research, by Daniel Bar-Tal, represents a step beyond the theories of Tajfel and Turner in the direction of recognizing that social identity is not based solely on the mere fact of categorization, but that “group beliefs” held by the members also provide a

rationale and character to group existence. Such beliefs are additional to the fundamental belief, namely, that the group *is* a group, and give a particular character to “we-ness and uniqueness” experienced by the members.<sup>14</sup>

Plainly, the scriptural norm Morgan has identified would qualify as a “group belief” of this kind, one that tells the members something fundamentally important about who they are if they belong to this group. Yet, just as there is a lot more to social identity than group beliefs, so too there is much more to being a Christian than holding this belief (*vere Deus vere homo*). First, there are other beliefs that are important, such as how the cosmos and human beings originated, the manner in which they should interact, and the ultimate destiny for the cosmos and humanity. Second, and perhaps more important, there are behavioral patterns that are presented as Christian, often exemplified in great figures like Francis of Assisi, Oscar Romero, or Martin Luther King Jr. These patterns include a relationship with God expressed in prayer and ways of relating to other people. Third, for some Christians, there is the continuous annual cycle of Christian liturgy. Fourth, there are the emotional and evaluative dimensions of being a Christian at a time when various denominations are experiencing turmoil centering on matters such as sexual abuse by priests and ministers, the status of homosexuals, the suppressing of prophetic theological voices by centralized ecclesial authority, the involvement of religious in the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, the possibility that traditional Christian views on creation have legitimated an exploitative approach to the environment, and so on.

In view of these various elements of Christian identity (to select only the more obvious candidates), how would one describe a theological interpretation of the New Testament devoted to clearly stating that in having to do with Jesus, Christians have to do with God? Probably as true, but as too foundational to have an immediate bearing on the crises just identified. In these circumstances, emphasizing the divinity of Jesus would appear reductionist. One would be taking all of the rich data in the New Testament and reducing them to this particular doctrinal formula when the contemporary situation might be calling for an infusion of biblical ideas and experience in other and more specific areas. While Morgan could say, as noted above, that he is not giving arguments for the truth of this assertion but rather simply propounding it as true, this would not allow him to escape the charge of reductionism in its use.

Let us situate the issue in a firmer context by trying out Morgan’s approach on an imaginary Christian congregation in church one Sunday morning. Assuming they all participate in the four dimensions of Christian experience mentioned above, we inform them that in consequence of our

historical research into the New Testament we have discovered that theological core to this collection of texts—that Jesus is truly God and truly a human being. Most will probably say, “That is good to hear. But we already believe that. Is the assertion of this truth to which we have long subscribed all that the historical interpretation of the New Testament has to offer us in leading our lives before God? In telling us who we are as Christians?” This imaginary scenario brings out the underappreciated fact that while theologians agonize about the truth claims of their religion (indeed, their identity depends on them and their continued fascination!), either asserting them or defending them, for most laypeople they are not hot topics. They are simply assumed. Regular churchgoers would not normally repeat a creed week after week if its central assertions were something about which they entertained severe doubts. The everyday fabric of Christian life is not normally disturbed by radical reconsideration of the fundamental beliefs of Christianity. On the other hand, there may be transitional periods in the lives of believers where this does happen. Adolescence, or tragedy suffered by oneself or one’s relative or friend, may trigger off this process. Nevertheless, a person who eventually denies a central belief is likely to sever his or her ties with the religious group, even though it is possible that someone who denies that the belief in question is true might maintain his or her allegiance in spite of this.

But there is a more worrying side to the reductionism inherent in “New Testament theology” than the fact that any attempt by a single scholar to generate a central theological norm or a fully fledged theology from a historical investigation of the New Testament will isolate phenomena that are almost exclusively of interest to the theologically trained but not necessarily to the rest of the faithful. This is that the whole process involves nonchalance toward the original form and communicative intentions of the constituent documents of the New Testament. Theologies of the New Testament (but far less so Morgan’s attempt to isolate a norm) usually proceed by propounding certain themes that are claimed to be foundational. Data from various parts of certain of the twenty-seven documents are gathered together to support the case being made. Some of the writings are invariably prioritized as affording a richer yield of the data needed (Paul’s letters are often the favorites). Yet since the interest lies in a particular theme identified as significant by the interpreter in question, the intention of the biblical author, the original communicative impact of the text, and data irrelevant to the exercise are sometimes treated with indifference. The whole process is like a mining operation. Areas with a rich lode of the right ore (passages containing the theological concepts prioritized by the exegete) are dynamited and excavated (the act of exegesis) and the minerals separated (the act of interpreting the exegetical

results) from the rock (the text under discussion), thus leaving nasty scars on the landscape (the text) and desolate heaps of tailings (the remnants of texts thought irrelevant).

Is there a way to avoid these consequences? Are we able to bring the results of the historical investigation of the New Testament to bear on contemporary Christian identity in a manner that matches and addresses its rich and variegated character *and* that does not violate the original form and message of the texts? The aim of this book is to propose a method of New Testament interpretation that achieves this result.

From the above critique of the current model of New Testament theology, it is clear that pursuing the “normative” will lead to precisely these problems: ignoring the intention of the original author, the effects of the text on its original audience, and the neglect of many texts and exegetical data. Seeking to extract from the New Testament a single theological norm or a set of related norms (a “theology”) will always result in these problems. After two centuries of exegetical effort since Gabler, it is surely time to try something different.

The condition that philosophical ethics found itself in some forty years ago is closely and instructively parallel to the contemporary attempts to erect a theology of the New Testament. For many years, Kantian and utilitarian ethics dominated the field. Both of these aimed to establish normative ethical principles that could be applied in difficult moral dilemmas. Kantian ethics looked to the nature of the act in itself, stressing what one should do in a certain case, regardless of the consequences. Utilitarian ethics demanded that one look to the consequences of an action and seek to produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number and generated rules to put this principle into effect. The endeavors of biblical critics to detect normative principles in Scripture are closely cognate with this enterprise of stipulating ethical rules for particular situations.

In the last forty years, however, an entirely new approach to philosophical ethics has become popular—one that builds on Aristotelian philosophy especially to propose an ethics of virtue, character, and the good life. Here the interest is not in difficult moral dilemmas, that most of us, by good fortune, encounter only rarely, but in everyday human experience and how to make it flourish. The aim is to lead a good life and the means to achieve this by developing character through practicing virtues.<sup>15</sup> In this ethics the emphasis falls on the *formative*, not the *normative*, although claims that it has no place for normativeness are unfounded. Virtue ethics does not teach moral behavior by postulating norms to be obeyed, but by holding up virtuous persons (“saints and heroes”) to be emulated.<sup>16</sup> In consequence, this form of ethics more

closely engages human life in all its richness than Kantian or utilitarian ethics, which seek to develop abstract norms and then impose them on behavior. For these reasons, the movement from rule-oriented ethics to an ethics of the good life and of character and virtue offers an arresting possibility for a similar transition in theological interpretation of the New Testament.

This analogy suggests that contemporary Christians can find resources for maintaining and developing their identity by attending to the diverse ways of having faith in Jesus as the Messiah, which covers all of the dimensions of religious life mentioned above and which a historical investigation of the New Testament has the capacity to disclose. Rather than concentrating on what the early Christians believed, the analogy with virtue ethics prompts us to determine how such beliefs were manifested and maintained in the totality of their experience in particular contexts, some hostile to this new movement, in cities around the Mediterranean.

In pursuing this path we immediately come up against the form our evidence takes, twenty-seven distinct documents, most of them epistolary in form, but the bulk of the corpus comprising six narrative texts: the four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, and Revelation. The author of each document (some of whom are known but most unknown) has sought to communicate a message or messages to Christ-followers of the primordial period, the great majority of whom were illiterate, that would cement their allegiance to the new faith and the new identity that came with it.

For reasons that will become apparent later, these messages must have been read aloud at meetings; that is, their meanings were communicated orally and accessed aurally. It is therefore reasonable to regard our twenty-seven canonical texts as scripts for oral performance delivered within a setting of face-to-face dialogue concerning their contents at the movement's (probably noisy) meetings. The oral and dialogical character of communication among the first Christ-followers will be a continual theme in what follows. The approach I will propose in this volume is that modern Christians join in this dialogue and engage with the authors of these texts on an interpersonal and intersubjective basis that involves hearing their voices as much as reading their words.

I must immediately acknowledge that taking this route is rather at odds with modern methods of encountering the New Testament as text. The omnipresence of printed text in our lives as a result of Gutenberg's fifteenth-century invention of the printing press represents quite an obstacle to our understanding and benefiting from these communications in a manner that accords with their original and oral and interpersonal nature. Marshall McLuhan once said, "as the Gutenberg typography filled the world



the human voice closed down. People began to read silently and passively as consumers.”<sup>17</sup> This did not happen overnight. While the Reformation promoted the spread of vernacular literacy and habits of reading, the old oral ways were not displaced immediately.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, displaced they were. Silent, often solitary, reading by individuals seems to have become dominant with the advent of widespread literacy in much of Western Europe, which was largely achieved during the nineteenth century.<sup>19</sup> Communication as a process of interpersonal exchange in a face-to-face setting became less and less significant.

Accordingly, there is a great chasm in communication, not so much between literate and nonliterate societies as between those that have the printing press and those that do not. There is a huge “gulf between our own modern Western, post-Enlightenment world of the printed page and *all* past cultures (including our own predecessors in the West), as well as most contemporary ones.”<sup>20</sup> It is essential to be cognizant of this if we are to avoid ethnocentrism or anachronism in our understanding of other cultures and eras.<sup>21</sup> But in addition to this, the dominance (especially since the Reformation) of the model of the solitary reader with the Bible in hand is one reason perhaps why there has been so little interest in the type of interpersonal approach proposed here.

The course of my argument is as follows: Chapter 1 will consider the state of the debate on using the fruits of historical criticism of the New Testament in Christian theology beginning with Gabler in 1787. In chapter 2, I will set out a model of persons in communion that embodies the social and theological presuppositions underlying my argument. In chapter 3, I defend the possibility of obtaining reliable knowledge of the past, including that of the New Testament period, in the face of recent skepticism. In chapter 4, I argue that the New Testament texts are nonliterary in character and that it is appropriate when interpreting them to pay attention to the communicative intentions of their authors. Chapter 5 proposes Friedrich Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics as a powerful model for interpreting the New Testament in a way that does justice to its oral and interpersonal origins. The chapter also defends his ideas in this area against the false and stereotyped manner in which they have been portrayed. In chapter 6, I argue that face-to-face communion was characteristic of the first generations of the Christ-movement, using 1 Corinthians 10–14 as a test case. Chapter 7 argues for the minimal effect of writing in the early Christian period, suggesting that writing was primarily a means to maintain personal presence over distance. Chapter 8 is the first of three chapters devoted to the meaning of “the communion of saints,” as a way of maintaining the presence of the deceased New Testament

authors among modern Christians; here I essay its origins and development. In chapter 9, I explore models for giving meaning to the idea of communion between Christians living and dead that do not depend upon those who have died in Christ having any form of postmortem existence. In chapter 10, however, I do proceed to an understanding of the communion of saints predicated upon the survival of the faithful Christian in some way after death that can be found in certain parts of the New Testament (Hebrews especially) and in highly developed form in various early Christian texts from the early second century CE onwards. Chapter 11 seeks to make sense of the canon in a way that is consonant with the interpersonal hermeneutics put forward in the earlier chapters. Lastly, in chapter 12, in order to illustrate what my method looks like in practice, I will outline the conjunction of history, hermeneutics, and communion in relation to a specific New Testament text, Paul's letter to the Romans. To keep the size of this book within manageable proportions, this last chapter is necessarily brief. Nevertheless, it should be sufficient to indicate the potential in the new approach to New Testament theology that I propose in this volume.

I

# THE NEW TESTAMENT, HISTORY, AND THEOLOGY

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## *THE STATE OF THE DEBATE*

The aim of this book, as noted in the introduction, is to outline an approach to interpreting the New Testament that is directed toward its continuing to maintain and foster Christian life and reflection. For nearly two millennia Christians have regarded the New Testament as a unique resource in understanding the meaning of God's intervention in the world through Jesus Christ and, just as important, in trying to live in accordance with the new possibilities for existence and the new hope thus unveiled. As Robert Morgan has noted, it is this vital role that the New Testament plays in relation to the Christian faithful—for which he insists “theological” is an appropriate designation and “New Testament theology” an appropriate pursuit—that is the motivating force for much research into its pages:

The word “theology” in the phrase ([namely,] “New Testament theology”) is no accident. Most people's interest in the New Testament, including their historical interest in it, has been engendered by its significance for Christian faith. The discipline has been developed in the interests of traditional Christian faith and also out of hostility to it, but not with indifference to it.<sup>1</sup>

For over two centuries, indeed, the efforts of biblical scholars to bring the fruits of the (largely historical) interpretation of the texts of the Bible into the service of the Christian community have been encapsulated in the concepts of “biblical theology” or, more specifically, “Old Testament theology” and “New Testament theology.” These concepts might seem, at the outset, to be broad and powerful enough to deliver the results sought, namely, the biblical or New Testament enrichment of Christian beliefs and practices. Yet while one must applaud the energy that generations of scholars have devoted to this task, a critical examination of “biblical” or “New Testament theology” from its origins to the present discloses certain systemic problems that have

always stood in the road of its achieving this end and continue to bedevil the discussion in ways to be examined later. Our first task, accordingly, must be to assess the nature of biblical theology from its beginnings onwards, both to establish the context and also to justify proposing an entirely different approach to the problem.

## GABLER'S BIBLICAL THEOLOGY CRITICALLY ASSESSED

Because we are all subject to the ethnocentric temptation to imagine that our world is the whole world, that our microcosm is the macrocosm, it is useful to begin with a recognition of the very circumscribed Christian context in which biblical theology was born. "Only among followers of the Reformation," Gerhard Ebeling has observed, "could the concept 'biblical theology' have been coined at all."<sup>2</sup> He could, in fact, have described its progenitors with greater precision as "theologically expert Lutheran and Calvinist followers of the Reformation in Europe." For as he and Hendrikus Boers have shown, biblical theology only emerged as a response to a major problem among the intellectual elite of Protestant orthodoxy in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The Reformers had sought to establish the authority of the Bible as the basis and norm for judging and correcting abuses of the contemporary church and for renewing Christendom. But whereas in medieval Christianity the Bible had been taken as an integral, almost contemporary part of the religion, the Reformers' move inevitably meant to some extent separating the Bible from the life of the church in which it had previously been embedded. In time this separation also came to encompass a sense of the historical distance between the Bible and post-Reformation Christianity. Luther and Calvin both managed to prevent the rift from opening too wide by their writing commentaries that related biblical thought to the contemporary life of the church. In due course, however, Lutheran and Calvinist orthodoxies began to erect dogmatic systems of theology.<sup>3</sup> The result was that "Reformation theology, like medieval scholasticism, also developed into a scholastic system."<sup>4</sup> Theology in the strict sense became the total explication of Christian doctrine; it proceeded by systematic method and was normative for exegesis. Protestant scholasticism even resorted to use of Aristotelian philosophy in spite of Luther's struggle against the dominance of Aristotle in theology.<sup>5</sup>

Such developments invited negative reactions, naturally enough in the reassertion of the Bible in relation to these elaborate dogmatic structures,

and these began to appear as early as the first half of the seventeenth century. This process took a fairly modest form in the first extant work bearing the title *Theologica biblica*, published by H. A. Diest in 1643. Here passages from both Testaments were collected under the names of central doctrines.<sup>6</sup> More negative was the response of the German Pietists. In 1675 we find one of them, P. J. Spener, claiming in his *Pia Desideria* that Scholastic theology had been thrown out the front door by Luther, but let in again through the back door by orthodox theologians, only to be thrown out again by the pietist churches.<sup>7</sup> Spener wanted theology brought back to its original simplicity. His was not an attack on Protestant orthodoxy, but a demand that its systematic theology be reformed.<sup>8</sup>

The Pietists failed to realize that by their formal critique of orthodox Protestant scholasticism they were actually raising a fundamental problem of its theological methodology—the extent to which theology should draw upon philosophy. This realization only dawned with the Enlightenment, when theologians influenced by it and rallying under the biblical banner launched a frontal assault on the use of scholastic philosophy in theology. A. F. Büsching raised this flag in a work published in 1758 that asserted the superiority of “biblical-dogmatic theology” over old and new forms of scholasticism. Thus he advocated a biblical dogmatics that stood out against scholastic dogmatics by accounting for Christian doctrine in a manner that could disregard the confessional statements of the Reformation and rest its claims solely on biblical texts. In 1771, Gotthilf Zachariä (1729–77) published his *Biblische Theologie* (Biblical Theology) which presented biblical arguments for theological doctrines as a means of criticizing dogmatic theology.<sup>9</sup> The vital next step, of removing dogmatics entirely from the work of biblical theology, was taken by Johann Philipp Gabler.

Before considering Gabler’s innovation, however, we must remind ourselves again of the context. The issue was not the very general one that has always affected all Christians—Roman Catholics, Christians of the various autocephalous Orthodox churches, and members of the various Protestant and Reformed churches and denominations—of how the Bible, and the New Testament in particular, might inform and enrich Christian life and reflection. Rather, it was the very particular problem of the proper relationship between the Bible and the dogmatic theology of early modern European Protestantism. Although in later centuries the issue has widened out to embrace, at least potentially, the connection between biblical data and the dogmatic theologies of other Christian denominations, this notable and historically contingent limitation of the discussion to dogma that attended its birth has continued to accompany it. One of the most remarkable features of this subject is the

rarity with which this obvious point is made. While, as we will see, there is great variety in the various models proposed for exploring the biblical side to the relationship, it is very difficult indeed to find anyone challenging the idea that the partner on the other side must be dogmatic or systematic theology, rather than some broader domain of Christian existence.

From a sociological point of view, this curious phenomenon is probably explicable in terms of the champions for various positions within this debate being either systematic theologians or exegetes defining themselves, often negatively, in relation to the theologians. Here the professional interests of the participants determine the game that is played.

This is not to deny for one moment that it is essential that the theological elites of every Christian denomination continue to bring their minds to bear systematically on the meaning of their faith (this entailing concern with the status of its “truth claims”) and struggle with the role that Scripture should play in their formulations. The question is simply—Why is this the only game in town? Why has the immense effort since Gabler to understand the role of Scripture—examined historically—in relation to dogmatic theology not been matched by an effort of at least equal intellectual seriousness to bring the Bible—examined historically—into contact with the broader reaches of Christian life and identity?

It is submitted that the answer to this puzzle lies partly in the sociological explanation just mentioned. In addition, however, there is the further factor that the initial task which historical analysis of the Bible set itself was not generally to determine what biblical texts, as communicative discourses, meant when they were first published. Rather, historical criticism, with the occasional exception such as John Locke (1632–1704),<sup>10</sup> set about discriminating between historical and non-historical elements (the latter frequently labeled as “mythological”) in the texts. Pre-eminent in this regard was *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* of David Friedrich Strauss (1808–74), first published in German in 1835,<sup>11</sup> with three more editions appearing by 1840. Strauss’s *Life of Jesus* became available to the English-speaking world as early as 1846 in the form of a translation of remarkably high quality of the 1840 fourth edition in three volumes by none other than the novelist George Eliot.<sup>12</sup> This approach tended to rouse the suspicions of many Christians, especially lay people, toward the whole process of historical analysis. We will return to this issue later in this chapter. For the moment, however, we must turn to Johann Gabler, who inaugurated the process that has led to the historical analysis of the texts to discern their theological outlooks being engaged solely with dogmatic theology. We will also look briefly at some of the developments after Gabler.

In describing what Gabler had to say on this matter it is important not to exaggerate his significance. Although he initiated a particular approach to

biblical theology, his reception in the nineteenth century was patchy and often diverged from his own intent. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to scrutinize the *fons et origo* of a phenomenon whatever may have been its fate thereafter. Moreover, Heikki Räisänen has recently explained and commended Gabler's proposal in his own significant volume *Beyond New Testament Theology*.<sup>13</sup> Gabler's ideas offer a useful contrast with the very different ends pursued in this volume.

Gabler set out his understanding of the distinction between biblical theology and dogmatic theology and the specific objectives of each in his inaugural lecture of that title as a professor of theology in Altdorf, Germany, on 30 March 1787.<sup>14</sup> This lecture is generally regarded as instituting biblical theology as a separate discipline. It is worthy of close scrutiny.

Gabler acknowledges debts to several previous scholars. Three of these were particularly important.<sup>15</sup> From Johann Semler (1725–91) he gained the idea that the word of God was to be found in Scripture, but was not identical with it (which freed the Bible for critical investigation without denying that it was inspired).<sup>16</sup> From Semler, but especially from C. C. Tittmann, he learned that religion and theology were distinct.<sup>17</sup> From Gotthilf Zachariä (1729–77) he drew the idea that some theological conceptions to be found in the Bible were subject to the contingencies of history, while others transcended such contingencies, and only the latter provided material for a biblical theology.<sup>18</sup>

It is worth quoting some of what Gabler said on the difference between religion and theology:

Religion is passed on by the doctrine in the Scriptures, teaching what each Christian ought to know and believe and do in order to secure happiness in this life and in the life to come. Religion then, is every-day, transparently clear knowledge; but theology is subtle, learned knowledge, surrounded by a retinue of many disciplines, and by the same token derived not only from the sacred Scripture but also from elsewhere, especially from the domain of philosophy and history. It is therefore a field elaborated by human discipline and ingenuity. . . . But religion for the common man has nothing to do with this abundance of literature and history.<sup>19</sup>

Today we are very aware that religion embraces far more than “knowledge,” since *experience* is central to all religion. Yet Gabler's now-dated limitation of religion to knowledge makes all the more noticeable the fact that it was the form of knowledge represented by theology—the realm of those capable of subtlety, learning, and ingenuity, not the knowledge of the religion for the “common man”—that exclusively engaged his attention.

How did he distinguish biblical and dogmatic theology? On the one hand, he says:

there is truly a biblical theology, of historical origin, conveying what the holy writers felt about divine matters; on the other hand there is a dogmatic theology of didactic origin, teaching what each theologian philosophises rationally about divine things, according to the measure of his ability or of the times, age, place, sect, school, and other similar factors.<sup>20</sup>

There was a stability about biblical theology that was quite lacking in dogmatic theology, which was subject to a multiplicity of change, even among the followers of Luther.<sup>21</sup>

Inspired by Zachariä, he advocated that biblical theology should proceed by separating “those things which in the sacred books refer most immediately to their own times and to the men of those times from those pure notions which divine providence wished to be characteristic of all times and places,”<sup>22</sup> with the latter “pure” notions to constitute its actual substance. “These passages will show with unambiguous words,” he adds later, “the form of faith that is truly divine; the *dicta classica* [“proof texts”] properly so called, which can then be laid out as the fundamental basis for a more subtle dogmatic scrutiny. For only from these methods can those certain and universal undoubted ideas be singled out, those ideas which alone are useful in dogmatic theology.”<sup>23</sup> In time Gabler further developed this approach by dividing biblical theology into a first stage that systematically set out biblical religion as it appeared conditioned by its original historical particularities (which he rather unhelpfully called *wahre* [“true”] biblical theology) and a second stage (just noted) where he isolated the universal truths in this historical shell (which he called *reine* [“pure”] biblical theology).<sup>24</sup> Räsänen refers to these two stages as “historical” and “normative” biblical theology.<sup>25</sup>

Gabler’s biblical theology was historical in the sense that its subject matter was a fixed body of material from the past, namely, biblical revelation, even if it was possible through critical analysis to distinguish historically contingent ideas from universal truths in that material. To this extent its methodology differentiated it from dogmatic theology, which remained dependent upon philosophical thought.

Gabler, however, regarded biblical theology and dogmatic theology as distinct yet closely connected. As Boers accurately notes, “Biblical theology was intended for a specific purpose, that is, to serve dogmatic theology by providing it with an independent base. With regard to its purpose, thus, biblical theology was not independent of dogmatic theology.”<sup>26</sup> In this aim Gabler was motivated by an attempt to understand the theological task as a whole.<sup>27</sup> After Gabler, however, it was entirely predictable that other scholars would establish historical analysis of the biblical texts as a discipline completely



independent of dogmatics.<sup>28</sup> That is, in time, precisely what occurred, with consequences I will return to below.

## TWO IMPLICATIONS OF GABLER'S PROPOSAL

Before pressing on to Gabler's successors, however, we should tease out two implications of his proposal of distinguishing biblical and dogmatic theology that he so confidently announced. The *first* concerns his entire assumption that historical analysis of the Bible (or of the Old and New Testaments, since he was properly appreciative of the very different type of religion represented in each)<sup>29</sup> that is directed to generating a biblical theology has as its end the provision of biblical truths for dogmatic theology. *Why*, we must ask (although finding a precedent for the question is surprisingly difficult), *did Gabler limit the historical investigation of the theology of Scripture, in the pursuit of both contingent historical details and universal truths, to the provision of ideas for dogmatic theology?* He subscribed, after all, to the view that religion and dogmatic theology were both types of knowledge, the former being the ordinary and plain understanding of the common man and the latter the subtle and highly sophisticated understanding of the theological intellectual elite. Why did it not occur to him that knowledge for the sake of religion was just as capable of being enriched by biblical truth as knowledge for the sake of dogmatic theology? In particular, why did he not realize that the delineation of biblical truths that were universal would find just as warm a welcome in the religion of the common man as in the elaborate philosophical structures of the dogmaticians?

It is most unlikely that Gabler foresaw that historical criticism, as it developed, would prove as unpalatable to so many Christians as it eventually did. Admittedly, English Deism, beginning especially with John Locke's 1695 work *The Reasonableness of Christianity, as Delivered in the Scriptures*, had established a strong current of rationalistic thought inimical to dogmatic interpretation of Scripture and that insisted upon viewing the biblical texts as witnesses from the past to be understood in their original contexts.<sup>30</sup> In the previous decade, moreover, from 1774 to 1778, Gotthold Lessing (1729-81) had published the *Fragments of Reimarus*, with their radical attack on the historicity of aspects of Jesus's life and of his resurrection. Yet it is most unlikely that anyone could have known before David Friedrich Strauss published his *Life of Jesus Critically Examined* just how radical and alarming to Christian orthodoxy historical criticism would become. *There is certainly no mention of any such concern in Gabler's lecture.*

Most probably the reason for Gabler's directing biblical theology exclusively to dogmatics was that he himself was a Lutheran theologian of his

time. He had been socialized, accordingly, to believe that the critical issue was the mess into which Protestant orthodoxy in Europe had got itself with the development of a theological scholasticism that was perceived to be almost as oppressive as that of medieval Catholicism. And all this in spite of Luther, and within a century or two of his death.

So it is easy to see why Gabler brought biblical theology into conjunction with dogmatic theology. This probably seemed to represent the reassertion of the Lutheran heritage at a time when it was in danger of being overwhelmed. Yet this explanation cannot disguise the fatal limitation in Gabler's proposal, or the serious consequences of both biblical and dogmatic scholars having been fixated on this way of formulating the relationship between historical research into the Bible and the contemporary demands of the Christian faith these past two-hundred-twenty years. This is not to suggest, as already noted, that there is anything wrong with an interest in the relation between Scripture historically examined and dogmatics, but only to insist that there is more to Christianity than dogmatics. It is most unfortunate that Gabler, the pioneer of the approach to biblical theological that was to become the dominant model, failed to pursue the consequences of his distinction between religion and theology. It is equally unfortunate that he failed to conceive the thought that historically elicited biblical data and truth could just as easily enrich the knowledge (to use his term) configured as everyday Christian religion as the knowledge represented in dogmatic theology. If he had done so, the subsequent course of biblical scholarship and its relationship with the Christian faithful might have been entirely different. When we expand the scope of religion beyond Gabler's "knowledge" to embrace dimensions such as experience and identity (as we must, given our modern understanding of religion), the potential for the results of historical biblical interpretation to enrich contemporary Christian life becomes even greater.

But Gabler did not have that thought. Instead, he initiated the idea that historical research into the Old and New Testaments could only be brought to bear upon the present experience and beliefs of Christians via the link with dogmatic theology (a link which was to become increasingly tenuous as the decades rolled on). The main exception to this was to come in the occasional, opportunistic context of the homily for ministers game enough to try out on congregations the results of historical research with which the latter were almost completely unacquainted. The possibility of a systematic application of the fruits of biblical investigation to the ongoing life of Christians was strangled at birth.

So it happened that as historical criticism of the Bible took hold in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there was a lamentable failure

to implement any systematic effort to apply its results in a creative way to everyday Christian existence, coupled with the production of increasingly radical views by its practitioners, whose historical research seemed to imperil popular beliefs in the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture—a phenomenon itself fostered by the fact that no one, partially thanks to Gabler, was urging a positive role for their historical investigations in Christian life. Not surprisingly, therefore, the combination of these factors produced an excessively negative misunderstanding of the character of historical criticism and a suspicion toward it among ordinary Christians. This suspicion culminated in the widespread anxiety that it was inimical to faith. Historical criticism was cast as a dangerous threat, not as a golden opportunity. It is for all of these reasons that one can say with some justice that 30 March 1787, widely regarded as the birthday of modern biblical theology, was actually a black day for Christianity.

The *second* implication of Gabler's proposal concerns his distinction between the contingent historical features of Scripture and its universal truths, only the latter of which could be injected into dogmatic theology. Some features of Scripture, such as the laws in Leviticus that few indeed would claim have application to Christians, seem to demand a distinction of this kind. Yet there is still a mischief to it. Gabler is suggesting that *all* features of the Bible that relate to the historical particularities of the ancient times and places in which its constituent works were written have no role in the theological task, for only the universal truths that can be distilled from the texts by historical analysis can serve that function.

Ten years earlier Lessing had written, "accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason."<sup>31</sup> In saying this he was heavily influenced by the philosophers Leibniz and Spinoza, who had distinguished historical knowledge from the necessary truths of reason (Leibniz) or natural divine law (Spinoza), and had argued that the former could not lead to the latter.<sup>32</sup> Lessing famously encapsulated his resistance to the idea that the fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ in the past could prove that he *is* the Son of God *now* in the statement "That, then, is the ugly, broad ditch which I cannot get across, however often and however earnestly I have tried to make the leap."<sup>33</sup> This type of view seems to have appealed to Gabler.

Robert Morgan (utilizing Clifford Geertz's notion of religion as a cultural system of interconnected symbols) has commented on this aspect of Gabler's program as follows:

Sketching the bare outline of the Christian symbol-system in isolation from its successive social contexts can only have a regulative function. The

biblical witness may have more purchase on contemporary reality when seen in its own historically conditioned reality.<sup>34</sup>

The point can be put more brutally than this by observing that Gabler's view entails the frankly nonsensical notion that modern Christians, struggling to do God's will and to hold on to their identity in their own epoch, are incapable of deriving valuable assistance from considering how the first people who followed Christ did God's will and held on to their new identity in the particular circumstances of their times.

Although Gabler unnecessarily and tragically confined the contemporary Christian realm to benefit from biblical theology to dogmatics, it is difficult to see that he would have taken any different view if he had also wanted to introduce the results of historical biblical research into the "knowledge" represented by everyday Christian religion. It would have been universal truths, not contingent historical features that he employed.

We may sharpen this point by suggesting that the problem with Gabler's approach is that it would have entailed the erasure of the otherness from the biblical data used in this task. To seek "universal truth" applicable to two sets of experience—that of the Bible and those who wrote and first received its various writings, on the one hand, and that of contemporary Christians, on the other—is to shun differences between the two situations and to pursue commonality. The possibility of learning from the other by the very fact of his or her otherness, of shaping one's own experience and understanding in the encounter with someone culturally unlike oneself, disappears in such a process.

No doubt it is artificial to charge Gabler with missing a potential obstacle on a journey he (unfortunately) never chose to make. Nevertheless, by conducting this modest mental experiment we are alerted to a question of fundamental importance if we do initiate the task that he left in abeyance, namely, the use of the results of historical research into the New Testament to strengthen and enrich the beliefs, experience, and identity of Christians in the present. And that issue is precisely what the current volume is about.

## TWO RADICAL SUCCESSORS OF GABLER: STRAUSS AND WREDE

Although the work of Johann Semler (1725–91) and Johann Michaelis (1717–91) during the period 1770 to 1790 had given the historical criticism of the Bible a decisive stimulus, consistent historical analysis came with the work of David Strauss and Ferdinand Baur from the 1830s onward.<sup>35</sup> As already noted,

in 1835 David Strauss, then only twenty seven years old, published *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*. With Strauss we encounter a rejection of the idea that history can be useful for theology. Whereas Gabler had proposed that the historical analysis of the Bible to discern its theological notions could lay the foundations for dogmatics, Strauss wanted, as he said, to “annul the life of Jesus as history” and then “re-establish dogmatically what had been destroyed.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, Strauss had both a negative and a positive aim, which can be identified respectively with his interests in myth on the one hand and in an aspect of Hegelian philosophy on the other. The fact that Strauss does not cite Gabler in *The Life of Jesus* may reflect the gulf between them on their attitude to history.<sup>37</sup>

During the years 1821–1825 Strauss was a student at the seminary at Blaubeuren in the state of Württemberg, where one of his teachers was Ferdinand Baur. At that time Baur was already insisting on the role of philosophy to give meaning to history, but he did so via the idealist philosophy of Friedrich Schelling (1775–1854), since he had not yet been exposed to Hegel.<sup>38</sup> Central to Baur’s appropriation of idealist ideas was the notion of history as “a continuous, gradually self-disclosing revelation of the absolute,” which represented a fruitful alternative to the then current but tired approaches of naturalism and supernaturalism.<sup>39</sup> During those years Baur also worked and taught on myth and symbolism in antiquity, including to Strauss.<sup>40</sup> Here again Schelling was useful, in his notion “that philosophical myths present ideas in visual, palpable form, and hence are not expected to be taken at face value as factual history, but are expected to persuade one of their truth.”<sup>41</sup>

In 1825 Strauss moved to Tübingen. He began to interest himself in romanticism, and read Friedrich Schelling avidly, especially for his philosophy of nature. Strauss and his friends also became involved in the spiritualist side of romanticism. In 1826 Baur also moved to Tübingen, to fill a vacant post. At that time, Hegel (1770–1831) was virtually unknown in Tübingen. In the winter of 1828–1829 a tutor in the evangelical faculty, recently returned from Berlin, began lecturing on his thought. In the winter of that year Strauss and some friends began an intensive study of Hegel. Strauss continued working on the Hegel in the years that followed.<sup>42</sup> One aspect of Hegel’s thought proved particularly appealing to him. Hegel had distinguished between *Vorstellung* (= religious imagery) and *Begriff* (= philosophical concept). Strauss utilized this distinction in developing his own theological and philosophical views. Hegel had claimed that *Begriff* transcended *Vorstellung*, raising its meaning to a higher and more adequate level. Strauss’s particular contribution was to equate *Vorstellung* with theology and *Begriff* with philosophy. It was not a big step for Strauss to argue that the heart of Christian theology, the Gospel

story of Jesus, was *Vorstellung*, a story representing a truth that could be better expressed in philosophical concepts.<sup>43</sup> In 1830 Strauss even conceded to a colleague that the use of images (*Vorstellungen*) or (“myths”)—which for ordinary Christians were often the content of the faith—instead of concepts could well be “dishonest” and “self-contradictory.”<sup>44</sup>

When he came to write his *Life of Jesus*, accordingly, Strauss was working with the idealist idea of myth as expressing an idea and the Hegelian proposal of the concept as transcending the representation, even if the extent to which both stimuli were reconciled in his mind can be debated.<sup>45</sup> So he worked through the Gospel accounts of Jesus, demolishing supernaturalist and naturalist explanations and interpreting the various phenomena as myth. Räsänen has rightly observed that “[n]ot only did Strauss demand a historical exegesis independent of dogmatics; he also carried out the task—with ruthless efficiency.”<sup>46</sup>

Yet at the end of this vast critical exercise Strauss made a positive proposal, that appeared as a short concluding chapter on the “Dogmatic Import of the Life of Jesus.” The core of this proposal was his conviction that “the central truth of Christianity was the divine incarnation in humanity as a whole, not in a single historical figure.”<sup>47</sup> Strauss expressed this view in the concluding chapter of the fourth edition as follows:

Is not the idea of the unity of the divine and human natures a real one in a far higher sense, when I regard the whole race of mankind as its realization, than when I single out one man as such a realization? Is not an incarnation of God from eternity, a truer one than an incarnation limited to a particular point of time.<sup>48</sup>

Hodgson reasonably suggests that the philosophical perspective here is one of monistic pantheism.<sup>49</sup>

Whereas Gabler had thought that New Testament theological ideas (of universal application) could be won using historical analysis to serve as a foundation for a systematic theology that could also draw on philosophy, Strauss saw no role for history in his theology. With William Wrede, on the other hand, we find a re-assertion of history, but arguably at the expense of theology.

The publication by William Wrede (1859–1906) of the short monograph “The Tasks and Methods of So-called ‘New Testament Theology’” in 1897 represented a potent argument for finally severing the connection between biblical theology that was conducted historically and dogmatic theology.<sup>50</sup>

Thus we find Wrede near the start of the work insisting that his comments “presuppose the strictly historical character of New Testament theology.”<sup>51</sup> For Wrede the task of New Testament theology was “to lay out the history of early Christian religion and theology.” This entailed, at the least, knowing “*what was believed, thought, hoped, required and striven for* in the earliest period of Christianity, not what certain writings say about faith, doctrine, hope, etc.”<sup>52</sup>

Allied to this was his view that “*the writers’ personalities and the writings as such are not important, but very subsidiary matters.*”<sup>53</sup> Wrede argued that in relation to 1 Peter, the Lukan writings, Mark and Matthew, *1 Clement*, James, the *Didache*, the Pastoral Epistles, and many others we know nothing or virtually nothing of the authors of these documents. None of them shows signs of an individual mind that one could class “epoch-making.” None of them advances an idea that became normative. However edifying, they contain only “average Christianity.” This meant “that these writings and their authors are of no interest to New Testament theology” and setting out their content is just the preliminary work for New Testament theology, the gathering of raw material.<sup>54</sup> He granted that there was a place for accounts of each New Testament writing, even these rather ordinary ones, in commentaries and New Testament introductions.<sup>55</sup> Wrede found epoch-making ideas only in the preaching of Jesus and in the writings of Paul and John and offered an extensive sketch of what a New Testament theology focusing on the works of these three figures might embrace.<sup>56</sup>

Toward the end of the work, Wrede considered how this discipline should be designated. He suggested that “the name New Testament theology is wrong in both its terms. The New Testament is not concerned merely with theology, but is in fact more concerned with religion.” Rather, he proposed that the appropriate name for it was “early Christian history of religion, or rather: the history of early Christian religion and theology.” He then, rather adventurously in the circumstances, proceeded to say, “If anyone protests that this is no longer a New Testament theology, that is a strange objection. The name is obviously controlled by the subject-matter, not vice versa.”<sup>57</sup>

Yet it is, in spite of this disavowal, very difficult to see any sense in which Wrede’s enterprise can be described as “theology.” It does not acknowledge the reality of God, nor does it exhibit any interest in the influence of the New Testament on the existence and identity of Christians contemporary with its exercise, both of which must be a minimal requirement for the description “theology” or “theological.”<sup>58</sup> Wrede’s is a purely historical account of early Christian religion and theology that is expressly disconnected from any service to the Christian church. As Morgan has observed, it has to be said against

Wrede “that New Testament theology does involve theology.”<sup>59</sup> Morgan himself has proposed a theological function for Wrede’s historical project: “It provides a criterion against which all theological interpretations must be tested. If these conflict with what historians say about the sources, they cannot be accepted.”<sup>60</sup> But this is a minimalist and essentially negative role for history.

Yet Wrede did not merely reject the relationship of biblical theology to dogmatics, he went further and strongly denied that it had any duty “to serve the church.” This notion was either “utterly untenable or utterly devoid of content.” His reasons for this view require noting, since they constitute an argument against the whole thesis of this volume:

The service to be rendered to the church would still have to be either the results of research or the way in which the material is treated or the tasks which are set. Striving to serve the church says absolutely nothing about results or method. Both are determined solely by the nature of the historical object. The tasks set also come in the main from the subject-matter. The questions and needs of the church can be a legitimate influence only in a limited sense—and probably least of all in the biblical field. On the whole it is not within the historical researcher’s power to serve the church through his work.

From this Wrede concluded that “[t]he theologian who obeys the historical object as his master is not in a position to serve the church through his properly scientific-historical work, even if he were personally interested in doing so” (emphasis added). The same applies to the whole business of investigating historical truth (that is, beyond the work of any individual researcher) in relation to the church: “the church rests on history, but historical reality cannot escape investigation, and this investigation of historical reality has its own laws.” His final statement on this subject reveals with absolute clarity that Wrede’s whole position on history not serving the church rests on the fear that this will inevitably do violence to the historical investigation:

It is, then, impossible to make the special value placed on the New Testament by the church of the past or the present, or any other account of its special historical importance, into a reason for a particular delineation of biblical theology, if this contradicts the nature of the subject-matter.<sup>61</sup>

Wrede must have thought that the condition in the last clause would be satisfied in every case. Although by his time it had become crystal clear that modern Christians could not continue to use the Bible in the same way



as their premodern ancestors in faith, since that would conflict with their modern, historically conditioned consciousness of truth, Wrede seems to go beyond this. Historical accuracy, he implies, would always be violated in any context of service to the church.

Lying behind Wrede's skepticism on this point was no doubt the long, sorry story of the hostility which historical research into the New Testament had aroused among many Christians during the nineteenth century. The specter of Strauss's onslaught on the numerous "mythological" features of the Jesus tradition in the Gospels and of the work of those who followed him continued to haunt the Christian consciousness. History was thought to be inimical to the supernatural dimensions of the texts. Much historical research was aimed at what lay "behind" the New Testament accounts.<sup>62</sup> In such a context Wrede's attitude becomes understandable.

But what if historical investigation were to pursue a different aim, not what lies "behind" the texts, but simply what they communicated to their original audiences?

## A CONSERVATIVE SUCCESSOR TO GABLER: ADOLF SCHLATTER

Whereas Wrede represented the radically critical wing of New Testament scholarship, Adolf Schlatter (1852–1938) stood for the very best in conservative scholarship. He was very much a theologian and consciously rejected the methodological atheism of modern historiography as applied to the Bible.<sup>63</sup> His *New Testament Theology* was published in 1909–10. Shortly after, in 1911, he published *Das christliche Dogma (Christian Dogma)*, thus producing two separate works, one historical and one dogmatic in character, in the spirit of Gabler. The conservative aspect to Schlatter's enterprise is revealed in his view that all the New Testament documents were authentic, except for 2 Peter, and his belief in Matthean priority. Yet he still believed in and practiced historical method, even while insisting that his theism was bound to affect how he did so. At the same time, while the fact that many of his historical views about the New Testament (such as those just cited) are not widely accepted has a negative impact on his theological opinions, he does strongly defend the view that history and theology can be integrated. At one point he wrote:

God does his work of grace and judgment not outside man and so, too, not beyond history, but in it and through it. So the New Testament utterly repudiates the thesis that revelation and history cannot be united, and this

at the same time destroys the view that historical research is a denial of revelation.<sup>64</sup>

To this extent there is some parallel between Schlatter's vision and the thesis to be argued in this book, even though the manner in which historical research and theology are to be combined is very different from what Schlatter had in mind.

## SUBSEQUENT DEVELOPMENTS: BULTMANN, STENDAHL, MORGAN, RÄISÄNEN, AND WATSON

Rather than attempting an exhaustive summary of the development of biblical theology since Schlatter, I will now briefly analyze five major contributions, from Rudolf Bultmann, Krister Stendahl, Robert Morgan, Heikki Räisänen, and Francis Watson.

My aim will be to highlight certain critical issues of the debate with which I will engage, often but not always critically, as I unfold the very different approach to bringing the results of historical criticism into connection with contemporary Christian experience, reflection, and identity outlined in this volume.

### *Rudolf Bultmann*

There is no doubt that the most successful attempt to create a New Testament theology in the twentieth century, even if its time has now passed, was that of Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976). During the 1920s and 1930s, aided by existentialist ideas he derived from the phenomenologist philosopher Martin Heidegger, he developed a powerful and distinctive theology of the New Testament that focused on what it has to say about human existence when confronted by God. He found this theology primarily in Paul and in John and expressed it most extensively in his *Theology of the New Testament* and *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*.<sup>65</sup>

Bultmann provided a succinct summary of his approach in the Epilogue to his *Theology of the New Testament*.<sup>66</sup> He was adamant that theology as the outworking of faith take precedence over theology as the product of systematization largely detached from human subjectivity. “It is of decisive importance,” he wrote, “that *the theological thoughts be conceived and explicated as thoughts of faith*, that is: *as thoughts in which faith's understanding of God, the world, and man is unfolding itself*—not as products of free speculation or of a scientific mastering of the problems involved in ‘God,’ ‘the world,’ and ‘man’ carried out by

the objectifying kind of thinking.”<sup>67</sup> These thoughts, in fact, “grew out of one’s new self-understanding.” By “understanding” he did not mean that produced by “a scientific anthropology which objectifies man into a phenomenon of the world.” No, Bultmann meant:

an existential understanding of myself which is at one with and inseparable from my understanding of God and the world. For I am I, of course, not as an isolable and objectifiable world-phenomenon but I am I in my particular existence inseparably bound up with God and the world.

For Bultmann, faith is not a form of self-understanding arising naturally from our human nature, but is “an understanding made possible by God.” He goes on:

Faith is not choosing to understand one’s self in one of several possible ways that are universally available to man but is man’s response to God’s word which encounters him in the proclamation of Jesus Christ. It is *faith in the kerygma* [the “gospel message”], which tells of God’s dealing in the man Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>68</sup>

A little later he encapsulates his position as follows:

faith can be nothing else but the response to the kerygma, and . . . the kerygma is nothing else than God’s word addressing man as a questioning and promising word, a condemning and forgiving word. As such a word, it does not offer itself to critical thought but speaks into one’s concrete existence . . . the statements of the kerygma are not universal truths but are personal address in a concrete situation. Hence they can appear only in a form molded by an individual’s understanding of his own existence or by his interpretation of that understanding. And correspondingly they are understandable only to him who is able to recognize the kerygma as a word addressed to him in his situation—to recognize it immediately only as a question asked him, a demand made of him.<sup>69</sup>

I have quoted Bultmann at some length because for many his way of conceiving New Testament theology, if ultimately open to criticism, was the most significant effort of its kind in the twentieth century.

Bultmann’s project, “though unsurpassed in the grandeur of its vision,” attracted and attracts much criticism and now seems rather dated.<sup>70</sup> The fact

that his focus on self-understanding found far more responsive data in Paul's letters and the Fourth Gospel than elsewhere in the corpus led to these texts receiving far more attention than the others. As Stendahl has noted, this gave "his New Testament theology a strikingly uneven character."<sup>71</sup>

The feature of Bultmann's theology that needs emphasizing to provide a contrast for what will be proposed in this volume is its monadic picture of the human person. Bultmann was preoccupied with the self-understanding of the individual before God. The *individual* of faith hears the kerygma in the particular circumstances of his or her life and must respond appropriately. Other human beings are largely irrelevant to this process, except to the extent they constitute the field in which the response is played out. For Bultmann, interpersonal relationships were not part of the central dynamic between human beings and God.

There is an extreme contrast between Bultmann's thoroughgoing individualism and the interpersonal nature of the Christ-movement that is evident, for example, on virtually every page of Paul's letters. I will cite one example. In Romans 5 Paul describes how God's love (*agapē*) for us is poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us (5:5; see 15:30).<sup>72</sup> God had previously shown his love (*agapē*) for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us (5:8). In the powerful passage at the end of Romans 8 Paul asserts that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ and the love of God, using *agapē* in each case (8:35, 38). Having thus described the divine *agapē* for us as involving God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit, Paul uses the same word later to epitomize how Christ-followers should relate to one another. In Rom 12:9-21 he illustrates the meaning of *agapē* between people with a rich series of thirty statements,<sup>73</sup> and reiterates its importance in this sense in two significant places later (13:10; 14:15).

Bultmann's straitened model of what it means to be a Christian is something he did not get from the New Testament but developed under the influence of modern philosophical thought, that of Martin Heidegger in particular. This was an unfortunate move on his part. Although for a period the sheer brilliance with which he assimilated Heidegger could hardly fail to impress, this type of synthesis ultimately failed to win acceptance. I will now suggest a particular reason for this failure. As we will see in the next chapter, in 1939 Martin Buber acutely diagnosed a central problem in Heidegger's thought, by suggesting that for Heidegger a human being of "real existence" is not the person who lives with another person, but someone who can no longer live with another, a person "who now knows a real life only in communication with himself." In short, Heidegger "absolutizes the temporally conditioned situation of the radically solitary man."<sup>74</sup>

Bultmann did not go quite so far. His solitary man (more like Kierkegaard perhaps, as we will observe in chapter 2) at least had God for company. Yet in the fundamental decisions of such a man before God, other human beings are marginalized or absent altogether. Such an understanding of the Christian is irreconcilable with Paul's vision of life in Christ, where those with faith in Christ receive love from God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit and love others in turn. It is central to Paul's gospel that the disposition—of *agapē*—with which God acted in sending his son for our salvation must be replicated in how we treat others.

### *Krister Stendahl*

In 1962 Krister Stendahl published an essay on the subject of contemporary biblical theology that has since achieved classic status.<sup>75</sup> Stendahl made a strong case for what he described as the “descriptive task” in biblical theology. He dated the possibility of such an approach to the development of the “history-of-religions school” (*religionsgeschichtliche Schule*), in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The exponents of this form of research, by comparing biblical data more thoroughly with comparable phenomena in the ancient Near East and the Greco-Roman world, brought into sharp focus just how different biblical social and religious features were from those familiar to the modern world. Important examples were the publications by Johannes Weiss (*Jesus' Teaching on the Kingdom of God*, 1892) and Albert Schweitzer (*The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 1906) that extracted Jesus from the comfortable ethical frameworks of liberal Christianity and “made a forceful plea for a most abstruse and appalling eschatology as the actual setting for Jesus and his followers.” Such work emphasized the difference between biblical and modern times and forced scholars wishing to explore the biblical texts in this way to creep out of their “Western and twentieth-century skin” and identify themselves “with the feelings and thought patterns of the past.”<sup>76</sup> The descriptive task simply meant spelling out the meaning of a biblical phenomenon “with the highest degree of perception in its own terms.”<sup>77</sup>

Above all, the results of the history-of-religions school made clear much more surely than had been the case before that the meaning of a biblical text was now split up in two tenses: “What *did* it mean?” and “What *does* it mean?”<sup>78</sup> Stendahl showed how initial distaste for the findings of the history-of-religions school on account of its disregard for theological meaning and relevance gradually gave way to considered responses by figures such as Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, and Oscar Cullmann aimed at confronting the distance between ancient and modern sensibilities. He observed that

when “the biblical theologian becomes primarily concerned with the present meaning, he implicitly (Barth) or explicitly (Bultmann) loses his enthusiasm or ultimate respect for the descriptive task.” In Bultmann’s case, Stendahl reasonably suggests that his plea for demythologizing, which entails stripping kernels of universal truth from the ancient husk in which they were lodged, meant a certain dehistoricizing of the New Testament.<sup>79</sup>

Stendahl proposed that there were three stages necessary “for the Bible to exert the maximum of influence on theology, church life, and culture.” The first was the descriptive task, the second was the clarification of the hermeneutic principles involved, and the third was the determination of answers to the question of the meaning here and now. He raised the possibility that teamwork with the disciplines of philosophy and theology might be necessary.<sup>80</sup> He was adamant that the distinction between the three aspects was essential:

The distinction between the descriptive function as the core of all biblical theology on the one hand, and the hermeneutics and up-to-date biblical translation on the other, must be upheld if there is to be any chance for the original to act creatively on the minds of theologians and believers of our time.<sup>81</sup>

The foundation for Stendahl’s view was the sheer value inherent in the distance of the biblical material from us:

For the life of the church such a consistent descriptive approach is a great and promising asset which enables the church, its teaching and preaching ministry, to be exposed to the Bible in its original intention and intensity, as an ever new challenge to thought, faith, and response.<sup>82</sup>

It is worth noting, lastly, that this 1962 essay does *not*, in spite of the suggestion to the contrary by Ben Ollenburger, use the word “normative” to denote the theological phase, of determining what the biblical texts mean, as an antithesis to the descriptive phase.<sup>83</sup>

How useful will this approach of Stendahl be for the argument of this book? At one point Stendahl suggested that by a descriptive investigation we were ushered “right into the world of biblical thought which deserves the name ‘theology’ just as much as do the thoughts of Augustine, Thomas, Calvin, and Schleiermacher.”<sup>84</sup> To the extent that he thinks that the results of historical interpretation of the Bible directed to its theology produce “thoughts,” we must ask whether this is not an unfortunately ideational

emphasis to the neglect of other areas of the biblical data, especially experience. The specter of Gabler's unfortunate preoccupation with religion as knowledge rises before us.

Yet elsewhere Stendahl offers many more useful insights that are capable of development here. He proposes two possible ways of mediating the distance between our biblical ancestors and ourselves. The first is a radical, ahistorical, or even antihistorical translation of the biblical material (as represented by Bultmann). The second, which he obviously prefers, is a systematic theology that depends on the historical framework of biblical thought (again, the stress on thought alone is unfortunate) being retained and considers that "the bridge between the centuries of biblical events and our own time" was to be found "in the actual history of the church as still ongoing history of God's people." A moment later he adds:

Such a theology would conceive of the Christian existence as a life by the fruits of God's acts in Jesus Christ, rather than as a faith according to concepts deduced from the teaching of the prophets, Jesus, and Paul regarding God's acts.

In sum, "*A theology which retains history as a theologically charged category finds in its ecclesiology the overarching principles of interpretation and meaning.*" Such a theology, moreover, "does not permit its ecclesiology to be transferred to the second last chapter in its systematic works, followed by that on an equally inactivated eschatology."<sup>85</sup> Stendahl went on to insist that once we move from the descriptive phase to theological considerations of this sort, the question of the canon of Scripture assumed critical importance. I will return to the canon in chapter 11.

### *Robert Morgan*

In 1988 Robert Morgan acutely analyzed the troubled relationship between history and theology in contemporary biblical interpretation. For Morgan a critical issue was that the Bible had come to be interpreted within contrasting frameworks—that of the believer on the one hand and the historian on the other. This meant that the biblical texts were subjected to the (often conflicting) claims of both reason and faith. Since older syntheses of history and theology (such as Rudolf Bultmann's) had fallen out of favor, our culture had become ever more secular and (with the exception of Germany) the number of biblical scholars active in pastoral work had declined, the existence of a

thriving historical criticism of the Bible located outside an ecclesial context had become more obvious and troubling.

Morgan allowed only a limited and largely negative role for history. The problem of the falsifiability of Christian belief posed by Reimarus required a historical answer; interpreters' use of historical method allowed them to reach beyond the Christian ghetto to the public square; and historical research was a useful device for ruling out arbitrary or even irrational interpretations. He mentioned Krister Stendahl's view in his 1962 essay (just discussed) that the church at times needs to hear the biblical message in all its strangeness, "its cutting edge not blunted by the familiarity of hallowed religious expectations," but did not much develop it.<sup>86</sup> Räsänen summarizes Morgan to be of the view that "[t]heology cannot be built on historical work, but theological constructions can be assessed and criticized from a historical perspective."<sup>87</sup>

On the other hand, in the same year as the work by Morgan appeared, 1988, William Countryman published his *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today*, which contained a powerful plea for the use of history to determine how the biblical authors expressed themselves in terms of their own religious traditions, not as an end in itself, but to show how "the inevitably alien past that is canonized in the Bible breaks our present open and directs us to new opportunities of faithfulness in the future."<sup>88</sup>

Morgan's answer to the dilemma he had identified was to have a thoroughgoing theological interpretation of the Bible, not tacked onto the end of a work of historical interpretation, a pattern they deprecated, but developed before the execution of historical research, with the latter informing it.

### *Heikki Räsänen*

Much of Räsänen's monograph *Beyond New Testament Theology* (1990) is taken up with an analysis of the history of "New Testament theology" as a discipline from a methodological perspective. A central theme of his analysis is that New Testament scholarship made a fatal mistake after the First World War when it "turned its back on the liberals and the history-of-religions school and succumbed to the rhetorical-theological appeal of dialectical theology."<sup>89</sup> His interest is really in reviving ideas that were sidelined by this development, especially those of Gabler and Wrede. Thus he considers that Gabler's distinction between historical and theoretical interpretation of the Bible, assigning the tasks to two different stages, was helpful, but has not been followed up. Wrede made a similar proposal, but his early death prevented him from pursuing his ideas. Bultmann's attempt was impressive, although he limited New



Testament theology to Paul and John (both understood in existential terms) and everything else that has happened since has been in Bultmann's shadow.<sup>90</sup>

He ultimately adopts Wrede's proposal in modified form: "biblical studies are to serve society and mankind within their own limited resources, but not the church in particular. The task is not proclamatory, but informative and understanding. The material has to be treated impartially, with no distinction between 'orthodox' and 'heterodox' views." Räsänen is really proposing a history of early Christian thought. He is aiming at early Christian thought directed to serving society and humankind, not the church in particular. Scholars of the church, on the other hand, can outline New Testament theologies.<sup>91</sup> Not surprisingly, Räsänen is basically in agreement with Stendahl's 1962 essay.<sup>92</sup>

Only in the final, brief chapter, however, does Räsänen hint at the desirability of exegetes also engaging in "a theological (or philosophical, or some other type or critically actualizing) interpretation of their historical work." For Räsänen is insistent that "[i]t is quite impossible to build a theology on the Bible alone."<sup>93</sup> This is probably correct, if by "theology" is meant "systematic theology." Yet it leaves unanswered the question whether the Bible may function theologically (understood in the broad sense I am employing in this volume) through the interaction of the messages it communicates in their historical particularity and contemporary Christian life and identity without the involvement of a structured systematic theology.

Räsänen agrees with the widespread appreciation that early Christian religion included experience and not just thought, but still favors retaining "theology" to refer to religious thought for the reason that a comprehensive history of early Christian religion, covering cult, rite, myth, and communality, would be too immense an undertaking.<sup>94</sup> This means that he is content to live with the unsatisfactory limitation that Gabler imposed on the subject in 1787. It is for this reason that Räsänen, for all the acuity of his analysis, has possibly blunted his chances of making a decisive new advance in this area.

### *Francis Watson*

The scholar who has probably moved farthest in the direction outlined by Morgan is Francis Watson, now Professor of New Testament at the University of Aberdeen. Beginning with a gentle sketching of the theme in a collection he edited in 1993, he has now produced four major works of explicitly theological biblical interpretation in 1994, 1997, 2000, and 2004<sup>95</sup> that are characterized by a powerful grip on contemporary theological and hermeneutical debates, fine analytic and synthetic abilities, elegant style, and a strongly

expressed distaste for history. By “history” I mean the attempt to understand the meanings of biblical texts when they first appeared in relation to their original context, understood in its fullest sense, using all the available literary, epigraphic, and archaeological evidence, which, unlike him, I consider exists in sufficient abundance to make the exercise a worthwhile one.

I will briefly set out aspects of his views on history in this sense, which are, at least in part, similar to those of Brevard Childs (whom we will return to in chapter 11). As opposed to his concern for the “final text” of the biblical works, by which he means “the form we now encounter it on the printed page,” Watson bluntly asserts in his 1994 text *Text, Church, and World* that it “has been agreed that the primary task of biblical scholarship is to reconstruct the diachronic historical processes underlying the text as it now stands.”<sup>96</sup> But there is no such agreement. While a consensus along these lines may have existed in the heydays of source and form criticism, since the inception of redaction criticism in 1948 with Günther Bornkamm’s essay on the stilling of the storm in Matthew’s Gospel,<sup>97</sup> there has been intense interest in the meaning conveyed by the Gospels to their original audiences, whatever the prehistory of the traditions they deployed. More recently, this interest in the meaning of a text when it was published has been strengthened by the rise of social-scientific interpretation, which generally builds on the sociolinguistic insight that texts have meaning in particular contexts, and by the development of socio-rhetorical criticism by Vernon Robbins and its recent use by Gerd Theissen.<sup>98</sup> This flourishing type of New Testament criticism, therefore, explores what the texts meant when they appeared in particular first-century contexts.

Watson’s *Agape, Eros, Gender* (2000) probably represents one of the most pervasively theological interpretations of biblical texts, in this case certain Pauline epistles, currently available. It illustrates brilliantly what theological interpretation might look like, what someone fully responding to the challenge posed by Morgan and Barton might produce. Yet the question that remains is what has happened to history in this project.

Watson rejects the idea that interpretation should be controlled by a hypothetical “background” reconstructed by the interpreter working with historical-critical method.<sup>99</sup> In other words, he turns his face against investigating the first-century context of Paul’s writings, using a full panoply of historical techniques. Thus, the main evidence from Paul’s setting that Watson employs to interpret 1 Corinthians is other biblical texts, although he sometimes also cites Greco-Roman texts. One instructive exception to his disinclination to dig into the historical context is a note on ancient Greek and Roman male haircutting practices—but then only through the (safe?) filter of a quotation from Calvin’s commentary on 1 Corinthians.<sup>100</sup>

Nevertheless, Watson still insists that the “canonical” approach, which he favors, does not involve treating such a text as a “timeless theological tractate” or “overlooking the historical particularities that are here ([namely,] . . . in Rom 1:1–7) given a canonical role.”<sup>101</sup> The problem with such assertions is to find what part, if any, the contingent historical details of Paul’s first-century setting play in his reading. While Watson may not regard the Pauline letters as “timeless” tractates, it is difficult to discern any sense in which the first century CE is for him a relevant, let alone an important, period. He is, after all, explicitly opposed to what he calls the “hermeneutics of historicism.”<sup>102</sup> To this extent his interpretation of Paul is a notably dehistoricized one. In all this Watson exemplifies Stendahl’s observation, noted above, that when biblical theologians become primarily concerned with the present meaning, they lose their enthusiasm or respect for the descriptive task.

## THE WAY FORWARD

Where do we go from here? I am entirely in agreement with Morgan on the desirability of the fruits of historical biblical criticism feeding into contemporary Christian experience and identity. This is a perfectly appropriate aim for someone wishing to speak to the Christian faithful and Wrede’s attempt (repristinated by Räsänen) to excise “theology” from New Testament theology misses the importance of this particular audience and its need continually to reconnect with its sources of identity and access to divine truth. Certainly there are other perfectly legitimate audiences, but there is nothing to prevent us limiting ourselves, for present purposes, to this one.

My difficulty is that none of the writers whose works I have considered seem to me to offer a reasonable means to achieve the result of the New Testament fertilizing contemporary Christian experience, although Stendahl comes the closest.

The main obstacle remains just as Gabler—whose project Räsänen has recently given significant support—left it, when he divided religion into the everyday knowledge of the ordinary Christian and the subtle, elaborated knowledge of the systematic theologian and directed that biblical theology could only be infused into the latter. There is an almost universal acceptance that in this context the theological dimension of the enterprise—the recognition that in the gospel of Christ we are dealing with a reality God offers us and with claims he makes on us—refers only to systematic theology. The notion that it might embrace the religious experience of Christians who are not theologians remains strangely unthinkable. Räsänen actually

entertained widening the project beyond theological ideas to embrace experience but rejected it as impractical.

The route proposed by Morgan and Watson, following in a line of thought going back to Lessing as well as Gabler (although with major transformations since), does not only entail the advocacy of a theological perspective adopted in advance of the historical interpretation of the Bible, it also involves ascribing to history an inadequate function. Morgan's role for history is rather attenuated, while Watson seems positively to devalue it.

The primary objective, therefore, must be the valorization of what Stendahl called the descriptive task. This means the investigation of aspects of New Testament texts that have a bearing on the relationship between the first believers in Christ that brings out their original meaning. Such an exploration does not require some digging "under" or inspection "behind" the text, but simply seeks to determine what those texts meant in their original contexts when they first appeared. Nothing more, nothing less.

This book is written in the belief that the results of such historical investigation are, *in and of themselves*, the bearers of theological truth. They speak of how those who first had faith in Jesus as the Christ generated a distinctive identity around that conviction and how that identity and the experience that produced it still have power to tell us who we are vis-à-vis God and one another. The importance of experience in the life of the first Christ-followers in relation to baptism, charismatic phenomena like glossolalia, and shared meals, and the connection of that experience to the crucified and risen Messiah has been persuasively affirmed by Luke Johnson.<sup>103</sup> There is no reason why such primordial Christ-oriented experience, understood in its own terms, cannot enrich contemporary Christian experience and identity within the model of socio-theological communion argued for in this volume. The notion that the truth of God's dealing with humanity and the cosmos in his son can only have a "theological" impact if it is mediated through the structures of systematic theology was untenable in 1787 and it is today.

The alternative to Gabler and those who follow this path is, as Stendahl suggested, to advocate a theology "which retains history as a theologically charged category." Such a theology finds in its *ecclesiology* the principles of interpretation and meaning. It does not relegate ecclesiology to the penultimate chapter of the complete presentation, moreover, but brings it to the forefront. This suggests a way forward. "A theological awareness of sacred history," writes Stendahl, "seems to imply by inner necessity a growing recognition of the church as something beyond an organization for the promotion of evangelism and theology." In the next chapter I will take up this challenge by presenting a socio-theological model of persons in communion as the central

feature of an ecclesiology tailored to present requirements. The aim will be to propose a model of dialogue and communion, necessarily intercultural and critical, between those first Christ-followers who composed the twenty-seven documents of the New Testament and ourselves. This model will then form the theoretical foundation for the chapters that follow. It will be apparent that this model is theological. Yet it is one that accepts the absolute necessity of seeking to understand our biblical forebears in all their historical particularity. It is not a body of systematic theological truth that can only be fed by breaking up or ignoring the historical distinctiveness of the New Testament writings. Rather, it is a way of rendering articulate the theological foundations of what we are doing when we seek to understand the original meanings of the New Testament as composed by persons who, like us, belonged (or belong?) to the body of Christ and experienced the same Holy Spirit in spite of the cultural chasm between us and them.