

Reviews

From *Trinity Seminary Review*

Post-9-11 North Americans now struggle with questions they previously lacked the necessary insight, or fortitude, to ask. As quickly as fresh queries are raised, packaged answers are offered. Yet this enigmatic reality is nothing new for the human condition, and nominal proposals never respond adequately. Douglas John Hall proffers the theology of the cross not as a solution to the problems of our context but as the courage and hope to live within the consequent ambiguity.

Hall's thesis guides the reader to discover how the theology of the cross leads to a church of the cross engaging the suffering world: the theology of the cross is "the most reliable expression of the Source" of Christian courage to affirm life in a world "preoccupied with repressing its knowledge of death" (p. 9). Centering upon a man's violent death by crucifixion presents a stumbling block in developing a life-affirming theology. Nevertheless, in the *Cross of Christ* God transforms the human spirit-to-kill into a new life in the spirit-beyond-death.

Hall bridges the gap between the story of our 9-11 world and the story of the gospel by introducing the reader to an astonishing work of graffiti on a bridge in his home town that reads simply, "Religion Kills!" One trite explanation given by some Christians to the terrorist hijackers blames Islam for being a religion that kills. Recent debate surrounding Mel Gibson's blockbuster *The Passion of the Christ* also reminds the world of Christianity's propensity in history to degrade Judaism in a similar manner. Hall challenges Christians to see how such expressions betray the faith that confesses Jesus as the Christ. When Christianity reflects the contextual values of the world's only empire resigned to a slogan of official optimism instead of living the story of the gospel, then it too mutates into a religion that kills. The theology of the cross directs the Christian faith to remain loyal to the gospel by engaging the world in dialogue.

The thoughtful organization of the book enhances the reader's ability to easily digest what otherwise has the potential to be a complex argument. In the first three chapters Hall explains the prolegomena, methodology, and goals of the theology of the cross. The theology of the cross recognizes suffering in the world not because it is masochistic, but because there is suffering in the world in which God insists on being. God's message in the cross of Christ overcomes death not from above but from within.

The second section of the book shifts the focus to how the gospel story responds to our context by exploring the doctrine of God, Christian anthropology, and Christology. The Christian God is a suffering God. The definition of 'god' as power is the strongest argument for atheism after 9-11. The God of power has failed, thus providing a new freedom to explore the theology of the cross. Only the crucified and risen Christ represents God to the world, and simultaneously the world to God.

The church preaches a theology of the cross by becoming a community of the cross. This is the essential theme of the book's third section. The "whole purpose of this theology of the cross is to engender...a movement and a people called into being by [Christ's] Spirit and being conformed to his person and furthering his work. A cruciform people" (p. 137). Opposing a ghettoization based on the fear of a wounded triumphalism, Hall proposes that the disestablishment of the Constantinian church is an opportunity for the Christian movement to actively disengage the culture of power so that it may define itself according to its vision of hope and then reengage the world amid its suffering and ambiguity by living the gospel story.

In the book's final section, Hall addresses the particulars of the Christian life with an eschatological ethic. Christians must not remain disengaged from the world waiting in isolation for a new age, nor are Christians able to bring about the Kingdom of God. Instead, the church of the cross reengages the world because that is precisely where Christ beckons us to follow him.

The book is dedicated to Trinity Lutheran Seminary in gratitude for Hall's time spent there as a visiting Professor. Originally given as lectures during the 2002 winter quarter at Trinity Lutheran Seminary, Hall maintains in *The Cross in Our Context* the accessibility and personality his students love. This Academy of Parish Clergy USA's "Book of the Year" winner gives vibrant testimony to Dr. Hall's passionate commitment to engage an ever-changing world by shaping fellow disciples in the theology of the cross. The words in print — already with a life of their own as theology — rise off the page to new life as spiritual formation for Christ's disciples today.

— **Kevan D. Penvose**

The Lutheran Church of the Good Sheppard
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The appearance of *Lighten Our Darkness: Toward an Indigenous Theology of the Cross* in 1976 introduced readers to a young Canadian theologian very much worth listening to. And readers continued to listen and learn from the subsequent writings of Douglas John Hall, now Professor Emeritus of Theology at McGill University in Montreal.

His magnum opus is a "Christian Theology in a North American Context" published in three volumes with the titles *Thinking the Faith* (1991), *Professing the Faith* (1993), and *Confessing the Faith* (1996).

Hall's latest book, *The Cross in Our Context*, serves a twofold purpose. First, it deals with the major themes of his trilogy. But rather than giving readers the impression that they can read this book rather than wading through the 1000+ pages of the larger work, readers are more apt to find themselves driven to the larger work in order to study more deeply the topics so interestingly presented here. A very valuable table at the end of the book helps readers cross-reference from this book to the trilogy.

The second purpose of the book is to show how the theology of the cross — a central concept in Christian life and developed in Martin Luther's thought — speaks to contemporary society with unparalleled clarity and power. In these pages, Hall gives us an extended commentary on the

statement of Jurgen Moltmann, "*Theologia crucis* is not a single chapter in theology, but the key signature for all Christian theology." Hall shows how the theology of the cross "works itself out in relation to the major areas of Christian doctrine," such as the doctrines of God, humankind, Christ, the church, ethics and outreach, and many others. Hall writes, "I intend this book as a comprehensive statement of Christian faith, in the sense that it touches upon all of the major dimensions of Christian theological tradition."

I have marked passages on nearly every page that I would like to share with you. Since this, of course, is not possible, I will simply conclude by saying that we are indeed fortunate to have a book like this from an author like this.

— **Rod Olson**

Golden Valley, Minnesota

From *Catholic News Service*

"The theology of the cross is not a single chapter in theology, but the key signature for all Christian theology," says noted European theologian Jurgen Moltmann.

Douglas John Hall has focused on this "theology of the cross" for much of his long career as a Canadian Protestant theologian, one widely read in the United States and beyond. Martin Luther coined the phrase, it seems, clarifying a biblical theme strongly present in the writings of St. Paul and other early teachers, distinguishing it from a "theology of glory."

A theology of glory focuses on a God and a church that is triumphalistic and judgmental. A theology of the cross emphasizes a God and church who offer people strength in another way: "My power is made perfect in weakness" is what Paul puts into the mouth of God (2 Cor 12:9). This power is reflected in suffering love.

In Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ," Jesus dying on the on the cross is portrayed as a substitutionary, sacrificial victim for human sin, offered to placate a judging God. A theology of the cross counters that image. It is a "not-much-loved but much-needed" interpretation that portrays a God and church who suffer along with people and do not stand in judgment over them.

Hall, author of "The Cross in Our Context: Jesus in the Suffering World," claims that for almost 2,000 years, Western Christendom in both its Roman Catholic and major Protestant expressions has been welded to an atonement theology that has guaranteed keeping God the father quite distinct from the suffering son.

Historical Christianity — Christendom — has steadfastly avoided the theology of the cross, he says, because such a theology could only call into question the whole imperialistic bent of Christendom. But with the demise of Christendom in the modern and postmodern periods, it has become possible for serious Christians to reconsider the meaning and role of this submerged "critical theology."

The author describes how the spirit and method of this theological view — one not well known in English-speaking lands — works itself out in modern ecumenical Christian thought.

"God's commitment to the world entails suffering," says Hall. To live with purpose we need a God best revealed in the suffering love of Jesus. This suffering God helps us understand our context, or current reality.

The power of love reverses both the secular power and destructive submissiveness with which the church has too often been identified. God's apparent weakness in Jesus is actually strength. It does not glorify suffering since suffering is not the goal. It is life-focused. Suffering is rather the consequence of claiming the power of faith in Jesus.

The weakness of Jesus, and those who suffer with him, becomes the strength demanded of those who voluntarily forfeit their strength in order to be strong for the other.

Disestablished Christianity, a growing reality in the Western world, is well served by a theology of the cross. Hall believes that disestablishment, understood through the lens of this theology, is actually providential.

The author proposes that the mission of the Christian movement in the 21st century is to confess hope in action, through suffering love and reflected by a theology of the cross.

Catholic readers should value this book. It interprets a stream of biblical, early church and reformation theology that connects with modern Catholic teaching and practice. It could help all Christians to recover a faith tradition "not much loved, but much needed" in our time.

— **Wayne A. Holst,**
a parish educator at St. David's United Church in Calgary.