

One New Book for the Preacher

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PROFESSING THE FAITH: CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY IN A NORTH AMERICAN CONTEXT by Douglas John Hall. Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 1993.

How long has it been since a theologian born and bred in North America has written a systematic theology? In this day of thirty-second sound bites it is unusual when someone sits down long enough and thinks deeply enough to attempt a systematic and comprehensive theological statement. That is exactly what Professor Hall, a native of Canada currently serving as professor of Christian theology at McGill University in Montreal, is attempting in this second volume of his projected trilogy. Following his 1989 volume, *Thinking the Faith*, and anticipating his third volume *Confessing the Faith*, the question lying behind this second volume is: "What would it mean to profess the faith as North American Christians living at the close of the second millennium C.E.?"

This second volume is divided into three parts—"The Christian Doctrine of God," "Creaturely Being," and "Jesus the Christ, Savior." Each part is composed of three chapters. The first (chapters 1,4,7) explores the history of the doctrine(s) and how they developed. The second (chapters 2,5,8) is a critical analysis of what is problematic about the doctrine(s) in the context of this contemporary culture. The third (chapters 3,6,9) is Professor Hall's attempt to articulate the doctrine(s) in a way that will engage and speak to the North American context in this last decade of the twentieth century.

This is a useful book for preachers, not because of its scintillating illustrations (although there are a few) or its pithy statements (although there are several). Its greatest usefulness to preachers is in the way Hall develops his theology in the three ways mentioned above.

In the first place, this is a wonderful refresher course in the history of doctrine which anyone who has been out of seminary for more than five years will find helpful and enlightening. Not only does he relate how the Nicene Creed came to be or how Anselm developed his theory of the atonement, but he describes why this particular statement was adopted instead of the others proposed. He describes the context in which the debates took place. He exposes the political and sociological situations which influenced the development. He raises up the problems they were trying to solve and the questions that the doctrines were attempting to answer.

A second major contribution is the set of analytical tools Professor Hall demonstrates. As he seeks to determine what is problematic about the various doctrines in the context of contemporary North American culture, he engages the reader in a thoroughgoing analysis of the culture—its values, its weaknesses and its deepest needs. He argues that the "old Theology" which posits a powerful, "Father almighty" concept of God not only fails to represent the biblical testimony to God but also fails to speak to contemporary North Americans who have begun to experience "the ambiguities, limits and real dangers of power; the emptiness of material prosperity; the falsification of reality necessitated by the ideology of success; the 'Catch-22' of the bid for mastery over nature (that we ourselves, being part of nature, must be mastered!)..." (p. 124).

Hall agrees with the conclusion of many feminist theologians that the human failing which the Christian faith must confront today is not arrogance but low self-esteem, not the sin of pride but of sloth. "...the humanity Christians are called to engage in this context resembles Sisyphus more than Prometheus...[yet] our Sisyphus still parades himself as Prometheus, not knowing any other role" (p.255). Hall raises for preachers in North America the question to be faced week by week: "How does anyone address a Sisyphus who thinks that he is Prometheus, or thinks that he ought to think that he is Prometheus..?" (p.262).

Hall cites Paul Tillich's three types of anxiety which he developed in *The Courage to Be*: the anxiety of fate and death, the anxiety of guilt and condemnation, and the anxiety of meaninglessness and despair. He agrees with Tillich that our anxiety today is primarily the third type, but our situation is complicated by the fact that our culture, unlike the European culture from which Tillich wrote, is so filled with the rhetoric of optimism that most people have great difficulty recognizing and expressing their need.

The third contribution of this book to preachers is the way Hall tries to shape Christian theology in a way that it can speak to the needs of people living in the North American culture. Space permits only a cursory review. Professor Hall wants to develop a doctrine of God which avoids the old Greek concept of substance and relies on the language of relationships, which he considers to be both more biblical and more in tune with contemporary experience. He wants to develop a doctrine of human nature which not only recognizes our connections with God but also recognizes and celebrates our "creatureliness" and our connection with the other creatures with whom we share God's creation. Hall wants to develop a christology that avoids substance terminology and a soteriology that avoids substitution terminology. He develops the idea of representation to explain both christology and soteriology, both the person and the work of Christ. Christ as our Representative is the one who brings meaning to our lives.

These brief remarks have barely scratched the surface of the rich lode of theology which is to be found here. This is not an easy book. It requires and deserves thoughtful study and reflection. But it will repay those who work it with new insights and understanding. It is an especially important book for preachers who want to speak effectively to the needs of people living in North America on this eve of the twenty-first century.