

One New Book for the Preacher

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A THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS: The Death of Jesus in the Pauline Letters, by Charles B. Cousar. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990. 194 pages, \$11.95.

The movie version of *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood was filmed in Durham. Permission was given to use the Duke University campus as a primary location. There was a scene in which women were being put to death using gallows. The gallows were set up in front of the Duke Chapel.

Will Willimon, dean of the chapel, tells about the numerous phone calls he received protesting this violation of "the sacred beauty of our chapel." There were letters to the newspaper and much heated conversation about the inappropriateness of the gallows in front of the chapel. A member of our congregation who works at Duke wrote to the editor of the student newspaper: "I don't understand what all the fuss is about. Maybe the people who are upset have not noticed the cross at the center of the chapel."

Maybe we have not noticed the cross at the center of the Christian faith. Just in case we may have missed it, Charles Cousar has written a book to refresh our memories. This is an important reminder to the church and to those of us who are responsible for interpreting the Christian faith that the cross serves as the foundation of the Christian community.

This book is required reading for all preachers getting ready to preach and teach in Lent. It deals with several critical issues and it does it well. This book combines good exegesis and good theology and makes them interesting. All of this has practical value for the preacher. It will preach!

At this point a warning should be attached. The book can be hazardous to your preaching if you take it seriously. Cousar invites us to look over the shoulder of a preacher-theologian as Paul writes some occasional letters to churches. We watch as he tries to clean up some messes in these congregations. What directs his approach to these problems is his understanding of Christ who was crucified as the center of their life together. Nothing hazardous about that you say. It sounds like good orthodox theology.

Cousar provides the reader with insightful exegesis looking in depth at the text. But he does not stop there. He discusses the theological implications which grow out of Paul's discussion of the death of Jesus and how that relates to our lives. At this point the temperature starts to rise and the readers realize that they are being invited to look at the world through cruciform lenses. The world looks different. Weakness and strength, wealth and power, judgment and mercy are not the same. It means the way we order our lives is directed by different criteria. And how we look at people who are less educated and less

affluent is different. What we encounter is an "alternative world in the Pauline letters . . . in conflict with the prevailing mores and values of contemporary culture."

I have not read a book on biblical theology as challenging, exciting, and substantive since Walter Brueggemann's *Hopeful Imagination*. Cousar opens Paul's letters for us the way Brueggemann exegetes Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Second Isaiah. At the center of this appeal to live in a new world fashioned after the crucified one is the God who is revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The discussion of God's attributes provides helpful insight about how we know and talk about God. There is also a good discussion of how Paul's writings relate to the traditional understanding of the atonement.

The book pleads that interpreters not flatten out the text or the theological insights to make them fit their own perspectives. Flattened out they lose their power to move us from the lethargy that characterizes too much church life into a revitalized community who follow the crucified Christ. There is a fascinating conversation with Ernest Käsemann in the book. Cousar expresses appreciation for his insight about the centrality of the cross in Paul's theology. At the same time, there is criticism of Käsemann's attempt to flatten out Paul's thought so that it will neatly fit into the justification by faith mold.

Two issues which seem to be our current thorns in the flesh are treated in a helpful way. The identity crisis in the church is recognized by Cousar when he suggests that "the delicate balance of being 'in but not of' the world is dreadfully tilted toward 'in'." The solution is not a public relations fix or more of the same triumphalism which ignores our crippled and compromised position. He recommends a recapturing of the importance of the cross.

The crucifixion shapes the identity of the people of God and functions as the basis for their communal and individual self-understanding. As the Jews are the people of the Torah, molded by the story it contains and distinguished from others by the circumcision it demands, so the Christian community is a people of the cross. In the story of Jesus' death preached in their assemblies and celebrated at the Lord's Supper, they announce who they are and discover how they are to live. (P. 110)

I was also impressed by his treatment of suffering. What can the Church expect if it follows the crucified Christ? Cousar looks at Romans 8 and allows these verses to illuminate the role of church in identifying with human suffering. "It is not that the Church goes out to look for opportunities to suffer; it only takes seriously its proper place in the human community, and suffering comes." (P. 174) It is clear where Cousar believes Paul would have us stand in the current debate about the church as a colony of heaven or a community that works to transform the world for which Christ died.

The book elicits confession. It is not easy to hear Paul's message about the centrality of the cross. It is tough talk for people like us who live in a society where security and comfort are ultimate concerns. It is not easy to preach and teach the centrality of the cross. But this book is an encouraging invitation to rediscover the scandal of the cross at the center of the Christian faith.