

One New Book for the Preacher

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REMEMBERED VOICES: RECLAIMING THE LEGACY OF “NEO-ORTHO-DOXY” by Douglas John Hall. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1998. 145 pages.

THE END OF CHRISTENDOM AND THE FUTURE OF CHRISTIANITY by Douglas John Hall. Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press, 1997. 66 pages.

Rather than recommending the prescribed “One New Book for the Preacher,” I have chosen to recommend two (relatively) new books. Both are for preachers and both are by Douglas John Hall. I further recommend that they be read in sequence and that they be read in the opposite order of their publication. That is, I suggest *Remembered Voices* be read first and *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity* be read immediately after.

Remembered Voices is a brief but careful analytical look at the work of seven theological giants of the early to mid-twentieth century. Hall begins by acknowledging both the awkward but useful designation of “Neo-Orthodoxy” as a movement and his own involvement in that movement (which renders him not entirely objective). Then he skillfully distills to almost nugget form the work of Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Emil Brunner, H. Richard Niebuhr, and Suzanne de Diétrich. Far from being “eulogies” or “exercises in nostalgia,” Hall’s offerings successfully provide the reader with an analysis of the work of each scholar as his or her thought can and should inform the contemporary church as we move from Christendom, that is Constantinian Christianity, to Christianity in a more genuine post-Constantinian form.

After noting recent trends in theology that have argued with Neo-Orthodoxy, Hall, in the introduction to *Remembered Voices*, observes:

The critical theologies that characterize the last three or four decades of the (twentieth) century have been, it seems to me, a necessary prelude to any conceivable reconstruction of the faith that would be wise enough to help Christianity move into the future both faithfully in relation to the tradition and responsibly in relation to the life of our beleaguered planet. (4)

And later:

The deconstructive approach (to Neo Orthodoxy) has, I feel, been so consistently applied...to (theologians) of our immediate past that we have neglected to discern some of the positive ways in which they already both anticipated our struggle and provided guidelines for our enterprise. (4)

With Christendom in decline, Hall rightly sees the positive potential of reclaiming

much of the insight of thinkers of a generation or two ago. Hall suggests that each of these scholars likely had a more realistic view of Christianity in culture than even their most dedicated students or detractors could have imagined. Hall reintroduces the reader to Barth's emphasis on the "self-manifestation of God in Jesus Christ as testified to in scripture" (12), Tillich's quest for wholeness, Reinhold Niebuhr's view of the tragic, Bonhoeffer's view of discipleship, and the ideas of Brunner, H. Richard Niebuhr, and de Diétrich. Hall's claim is that these scholars' offerings continue to be relevant to and needed by the church as it moves beyond Christendom to Christianity.

Thus, the second piece I recommend becomes a logical companion to *Remembered Voices*. One in a series entitled *Christian Mission and Modern Culture*, edited by Allan Neely, H. Wayne Pipkin, and Wilbert R. Shenk, *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity* is a volume thin in pages but thick with useful insight. Depending on how extensively one underlines the rich text, one can read the small volume in little more than two hours. This collection of four lectures explores in summary fashion the decline of Christendom; the dilemma of liberal and moderate churches in the face of the loss of their place of cultural acceptance; the disengagement of Christian theology so that it might be re-engaged in more useful ways; and the biblical image of the church after Christendom as salt, yeast, and light in the world.

While many others have dealt at length with these themes, I find Hall's treatment more approachable, more useful in general, more trusting of preachers in particular, and much nearer the target than, for example, Will Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas in *Resident Aliens*. While others seem to see the church after Christendom in full retreat, Hall sees the Christian Church after Christendom as having a proactive, essential, and, dare one say it, providential role. I find that hopeful. If Hall is right, and I think he is, those of us who have been schooled in the work of Barth, Tillich, the Niebuhrs, Bonhoeffer, Brunner, and de Diétrich might do well to reclaim our roots and be encouraged. Perhaps we're ahead of the curve after all.