

One New Book for the Preacher

Stephen R. Montgomery

Northwoods Presbyterian Church, Doraville, Georgia

THINKING THE FAITH: CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY IN A NORTH AMERICAN CONTEXT, by Douglas John Hall. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989. Hardback, \$29.95

"Theology requires courage," the author writes. "Beginners in theology frequently expect to read works of Christian thought as if they were reading Agatha Christie. It may require wit to read Ms. Christie, but it does not require courage" (p. 242).

Douglas John Hall is correct. For over two decades, there has been a great deal of creative . . . and courageous . . . energy among Third World theologians. As they engage themselves in their world and in scriptures, the God of the exodus—a liberating God—has become real to people of faith in those lands, and has empowered them to become agents of liberation and justice, leading to a vibrant and growing church.

For a longer period of time, theologians of the Second World have (courageously) adopted the metaphor of "exile" as the appropriate metaphor for their church, leading to the existence of lively Christian communities in their countries. Russian Orthodox theologians have taught us something of the radical nature of the liturgy in exile, and Eastern European theologians such as Milan Opechinsky of Czechoslovakia have brought out the humanizing elements in nontriumphalistic expressions of the Christian faith. Thus it was no surprise to many that the church was so intimately involved in the seeds of reform recently in Eastern Europe.

So what of theology in the First World? Or more specifically, how can we *think* the Christian faith in a North American context? This is the question that Professor Hall begins to address in this first volume of what will eventually be a trilogy. Hall, a professor of Christian Theology at McGill University has long been one of those theologians who has combined a highly readable style and solid scholarship with a cutting-edge relevance. His writings have helped preachers reclaim the biblical metaphor of the steward, rediscover prayer, and reevaluate the theology of the cross. Now this systematic theology helps us rethink the faith in our context in equally creative and readable ways.

Professor Hall claims that too much of our theology on the North American continent has been secondhand—gleaned from spiritual struggles of other people and "applied" to our society with little concern for adjusting them to the particularities of our milieu. European and Latin American theologies have much to add to those of us who live in North America, but those theological confessions have been hammered out on the anvils of their experiences in Europe or Latin America. We need to be "place-conscious" in our theology as well

as time-conscious.

Thus Hall establishes the need for contextual theology. "Faith is the grace-given courage to engage the world [when and where we are.] Theology is a disciplined reflection and commentary upon faith's engagement. Theology therefore is contextual, and that by definition" (p. 74). He argues convincingly that the church at its best has always been contextual and at its worst has been noncontextual. "When the church permits its theology to transcend time and place—that is, when it substitutes past time and place for the present—it is always contributing to evil, and sometimes to spectacular evil" (p. 99).

A classic example of this distinction is cited in two statements from church leaders in Germany in the 1930's. Heinrich Gruber, founder of an organization which helped Jews escape from the Nazis said very simply: "The Gospel in our time [and we might add, place] is that Jesus Christ was a Jew." Contrast that statement with one made by Hitler's "Bishop of the Reich," Ludwig Muller, who declared "I can accept *all* the creeds." A theology must help the church discern the appropriate word through immersion in the context of time and place; and, as Gruber noted, that includes solidarity with the victims of society.

Thus the first half of this volume argues the case for contextuality and identifies seven predominant crises which are components of our context: The end of the Constantinian era, religious pluralism, Auschwitz, Marxism, the rebellion of nature, nuclearism, and the rise of religious simplism. We are at the end of an age, which can be a frightening and disillusioning experience for many, but he explores the paradox that it is precisely at that point that it becomes possible to discern the truth that *could*—with the grace of God—fashion itself into a more genuine approximation of human hope. This could only happen when we are honest about our context. Therefore contextual theology becomes critical theology, serving the biblical God in its social context only by naming the inadequacy and the dangers of the illusion its society tries still to cling to.

Having set the context, Hall then examines the elements of the theological discipline (faith, the Bible, tradition, experience, prayer, the church, and "the world"). Each one of these sections is rich enough to provoke lively theological discussions in study groups and to provide homiletical juice for the preacher. He then moves to theological method, which is also subjected to contextual consideration. "Everything must be geared to the concrete realities of time and place; everything must serve the here and now beloved by God" (p. 367). He closes with epistemological reflections on the revealed character of the Christian faith.

All theology is certainly tentative and ultimately inadequate. There is much more work to be done in this field, not just by Professor Hall in his remaining volumes (*Professing the Faith* and *Confessing the Faith*), and not just by other scholarly theologians, but this work presents a challenge to all North American preachers. For example, Hall suggests that theology today needs to turn to art, story, drama, music, poetry to help discern our context and he does this in a limited way. But more of this is needed from preachers.

There is much talk of a malaise in mainline churches today, and church

growth seminars seem to be the rage. What is needed first and foremost, however, is intellectual daring in our theology. Second and Third World church leaders have shown us how such courageous and faithful thinking can enliven and transform not only church, but society. It is time for those of us in the First World to learn to do theology for ourselves—a people at the nerve center of the affluent nations of the Northern hemisphere. It will be painful, for Hall states that critical self-awareness may well produce acute forms of mental discomfort. “To do theology anywhere in the First World today means to suffer” (p. 19). But in the quest to raise up a community of thinking Christians who are able to bear prophetic witness to the truth of God in our problematic world, this is an important, indeed, crucial, book.