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Professing the Faith: Christian theology in a North American context

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The question remains: Would we want to live in this building? But perhaps the question misses the point. Altizer implies that we already do. Indeed, a case could be made that were modernity forced to explain its faith in Christian terms, Altizer's thought would be a sure guide. But for Trinitarians who have not yet made modernity their eternal home, the value of *Genesis* lies in unveiling the tacit unorthodox presuppositions of the contemporary West and in making possible a more discerning orthodox response—and, perhaps, in forcing a more thorough understanding of the Trinitarianism they so piously espouse.

Highly recommended for readers of apologetic, systematic, and philosophical theology.

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Professing the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context

Douglas John Hall

Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1993

566 pp.

Having moved to Lunenburg from rural New Denmark, it was a shock to me that the church is no longer the centre of the community in most of Canada. In thinking about the reason for this, it has been interesting to read *Professing the Faith*. Hall's book addresses the question, "What does it mean to profess the faith as North American Christians living at the close of the second millennium C.E.?" (p. ix)

I have appreciated Hall's book because it addresses an urgent question for all of us—a question which will certainly affect our weekly preaching. Hall writes in a style I can understand, which means he is clear and straight forward. Many of the theologians that I have read in the past I could not really understand. I also appreciate that Hall tries to base his answer to the main question on Biblical themes and the historical interpretations of those Biblical themes. In doing so, he shows respect for both conservative and liberal traditions.

Hall begins his book with an introduction to the situation in North America today. Being a Canadian he addresses both the Canadian and the U.S. situation. Canada is not always lumped in with the U.S. However Mexico is left out of North America.

The book has three main parts: Part I Theology: The Christian Doctrine of God; Part II Creaturely Being; Part III Jesus the Christ, Savior. Each part includes three chapters. The first chapter in each part deals with

historical theology. "It recalls the tradition of Christian thought in the light of its reception—including its neglect—within our ecclesiastical context." The second chapter in each part deals with critical theology. "It points up flaws and problematic elements within the received tradition, as well as alternatives overlooked by evolving Christendom." The third chapter in each part deals with constructive theology. "It proposes ways in which the faith might be professed responsibly under the present sociohistorical conditions in our North American context" (p. 32).

Hall's approach to professing theology reminds me of an old story attributed to Martin Luther. The church is like a drunken man riding a horse. One moment he is leaning too far to the right and he has to be propped up, and then the next moment he is leaning too far to the left and he has to be propped up a second time. Hall attempts to find the right theology to prop us up straight in North America.

In the first section about God, Hall makes these points:

- 1) The church has pushed the message of the certitude of the truth about God so far that it has forgotten the Biblical message that God is still a mystery.
- 2) The church has pushed the message of God's victory over nonbeing (or chaos) so far that it has forgotten the Biblical message of God taking risks and even suffering for the people God loves.
- 3) The church has pushed the message that God's work is truly finished so far that it has forgotten the Biblical message that God is still working and the final result of that work is not yet clear.

By stressing what has been forgotten Hall hopes to make the necessary corrections to prop us up straight. He summarizes by saying that we need to talk about God who is a suffering God. "The God whom Jesus reveals is a suffering God: that is entirely clear, and Christians must simply stop trying to have it otherwise" (p. 181).

Part II is entitled "Creaturely Being". In this section Hall reminds us of our own creaturehood which in the past humanity has rarely wanted to acknowledge. It was God's intention from the beginning that humans be a part of an interrelated creation. When humans come to a proper knowledge of their own creaturehood then they are able gratefully to acknowledge and accept this as their real, intended, and good estate (p. 337). The final destiny of all creation is not annihilation but consummation with God and one another.

Hall also makes this important observation: "Being" in the Bible means "being-with". This includes not only the relationship between God and humans, and the relationship between humans and humans; it also includes the relationship between humans and all the rest of creation (p. 321).

"Jesus the Christ, Savior" is the title of Part III. Hall begins this section by stating that we are Christians not by adhering to specific doctrines about Jesus Christ, but rather by adhering to Jesus Christ (p. 365). Two vital affirmations that Hall thinks necessary for professing the faith today are:

1. Jesus was genuinely human; 2. Jesus was uniquely related to the being and purposing of God (p. 385).

When Hall considers the work of Christ he notes that the historic theories of atonement were connected to the problem of the day. The anxiety over fate and death brought forth the theory of deliverance. The anxiety of guilt and condemnation brought forth the theory of sacrifice. The anxiety of meaninglessness and despair brought forth the theory of demonstration (p. 415). Each theory presupposes a different reading of the human predicament. Hall thinks that our predicament in North America today is powerlessness that leads to disillusionment and despair. The old theories of atonement do not seem to be helpful today. Hall thinks a good way of explaining Christ's work to the people today is to look at Jesus as our representative. "Jesus is with us so unreservedly that he may represent us before God; Jesus is with God so unreservedly that he may represent God to us" (p. 514). In order to be our representative Jesus must take our anxiety, our powerlessness unto himself. Then he is able to bring power and meaning to our lives.

Hall explains how Jesus changes us in this way: "In entering into full solidarity with us as God's anointed one, Jesus carries our humanity with him to the encounter with God, our Creator. Through the suffering that is the inevitable consequence of this encounter, we are enabled at last to accept our creaturehood—to cease both trying to rise above it and trying to avoid its true calling. As we begin to experience the 'righted' relationships that are consequent upon this acceptance, we discover new meaning in our creaturehood" (p. 543).

Hall ends this section with this last sentence: "Befriended by the God who not only understands our frame and remembers that we are dust, but assumes our flesh, we are enabled to begin to assume the full burden and glory of our creatureliness" (p. 548).

I recommend this book to preachers for two reasons:

- 1) I can understand this book.
- 2) It deals with the question all preachers must face, how do we profess the faith in Canada today?

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