

Foreword: A Friendship of Shared Memories

A few years ago Douglas John Hall returned to Union Theological Seminary, New York, where he had earned a doctorate in 1963. Alone he wandered through the impressive stone buildings. He visited the library, whose world-renowned collection endures; the chapel, whose renovation in the late 1970s did not eliminate totally its sacred space; and the refectory, whose elegant architecture invites the breaking of bread in the sharing of community.

After these wanderings, Doug sat in the courtyard, there to reflect upon his student life. Professorial figures dominated. From John Bennett to Henry Pitney Van Dusen (alas, the male spectrum only), they surrounded Doug like a great cloud of witnesses. As he returned to that past, that past returned to him. But how is it that I, who was not present at this re-creation, can write about it? The answer comes through a letter Doug shared. We remember.

When I reflect on the shared memories, my mind travels to a seminar on Deuteronomy that Doug, I, and others took with Professor Samuel Terrien. A single incident surfaces—as amusing now as it was then. Each of us made an oral report to the class. As a student in Theology, not in Bible, Doug offered a somewhat different approach. Soon thereafter, a few of us happened to meet Professor Terrien in the hallway. He was ecstatic. Apparently unaware of the irony, he let us biblical students know that Doug’s paper was the model to emulate.

Outside this incident, Deuteronomy provides a way to view Doug’s theological pilgrimage. That way links past, present, and future. As ancient Israel celebrated the harvest festival, it recounted its past—a story stretching from the ancestor Jacob to settlement in “a land flowing with milk and honey” (Deut. 26:5-9). In the retelling, the ancestors became “we” and “us.” Past and present intertwined. Another passage continued the linkage by including “those who are not here with us today” (Deut. 29:14-15). Present stretched into future.

Not unlike Deuteronomy, Doug’s writings embrace past, present, and future. From the citing of biblical references, he moves through centuries, continents, and characters: Anselm of Canterbury to Zwingli in the male environments of Europe past; McFague, Ruether, Soelle with contemporary feminist voices in North America and Europe; Endo, Kitamori, Koyama, and

Song with Asian contributions. And if by itself, the act of writing nods toward the future—toward readers yet to come—there is more. In the lovely “Dedication” of *What Christianity Is Not* (2013)—a book he “intends” to be his last—Doug addresses his grandchildren. Ever the teacher, he commends to them the Word and the Spirit that illuminate his life and work. Their future enters his present even as the past endures.

The ancestor Jacob informs Doug’s theology in another way. Scoundrel that he was, Jacob wrestled mightily in deep darkness with a stranger from whom he demanded a blessing (Gen. 32:22–32). He got the blessing but walked away limping. Scoundrel that he is not, Doug wrestles mightily in deep darkness with mysteries of faith. He knows wound and blessing. If, for our former classmates, this Jacob story reads as “the magnificent defeat” (Frederick Buechner) versus “the crippling victory” (Walter Brueggemann), for Doug it leads to “the theology of the cross.”

“Lighten our darkness” became the title of one of Doug’s compelling books. In it he writes of struggles and sufferings, of mystery and paradox, of abandonment, defeat, and death—all without a triumphal ending. He wrestles with the cross as deep darkness spreads over the land (cf. Mark 15:33). He knows that blessing comes not on his terms, or ours. Hardly by chance, then, does Doug’s “last” book, the one dedicated to his grandchildren, conclude with the piercing and italicized affirmation: “*and him crucified*” (1 Cor. 1:23). Beginning with the ancestors, the theology of the cross illuminates our way and spreads to those to come.

From his student years at Union Theological Seminary through decades of professorial activities to continuing literary pursuits in retirement, Douglas John Hall offers no dramatic turns, no attention-grabbing proclamations, no facile theologies but rather the wisdom of a pilgrim of faith in a turbulent world. For a steady sharing of mystery, meaning, and memories, my appreciation extends across years of friendship.

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