

Introduction

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The theologian is charged with the responsibility of interpreting for his or her own time and place the very core of the faith—gospel for the here and now. . . . The theological vocation, then, requires a courage that is more than natural—the courage of being, in Paul’s language, a “fool for Christ,” a courage that darkly suspects, however, that most of the time it is just playing the fool.

—DOUGLAS JOHN HALL (2005:22, 24)¹

“Gospel for the here and now”—these five words could well sum up the writing and teaching career of Douglas John Hall, which has spanned nearly five decades. In twenty-five books and countless essays, he has repeatedly courted the risk of “playing the fool” in order to press the church and Christians to a more disciplined, intellectually engaged faith that takes seriously the gospel imperative to “confess Christ and him crucified” in our contemporary context. The “dark suspicion” that the theologian often plays the fool demonstrates Hall’s typical modesty while belying the bold and invigorating message of his theological project. In addressing both the hopes and the hubris of the church and the discipline of theology, his words are sharp but never barbed, pleading and urgent without making room for despair or cynicism.

Given his appreciation for the apophatic approach in theology—the *via negativa*—one might best begin to describe Hall’s contribution to the discipline of theology by first saying a few things about what he is *not*.² Douglas John Hall

1. QUOTES FROM HALL’S BOOKS WILL BE CITED WITH IN-TEXT REFERENCES, USING THE PUBLICATION YEAR AND PAGES, AND KEYED TO THE BIBLIOGRAPHY THAT FOLLOWS THIS INTRODUCTION.

2. Hall’s latest book, *What Christianity Is NOT: An Exercise in “Negative” Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013), which he says will be his last, explicitly addresses the apophatic approach.

has not been the founder of any particular school or movement in theology, nor is he an exemplar for any such school or movement. He does not easily wear an ideological label, such as “neoliberal” or “neo-orthodox” or “process” theologian. In spite of his explicitly Canadian roots, he is not especially concerned with exploring his social location as a theologian. He does not show uncritical devotion to any of his formidable teachers or influences: Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, Karl Barth, and a host of others. Nor is he regarded as a theological spokesperson for particular issues of social justice and political import.

It is important to highlight approaches that Hall does *not* exemplify because, stated positively, these are terms that have been used to describe many of his esteemed friends and contemporaries. Indeed, one might well think it extraordinary that Hall has garnered a dedicated following without embracing a school, label, social location, cultus, or issue, the self-identifications that are often *de rigueur* for attracting an audience. If anything, Hall explicitly eschews ideological impulses in theology, even as he sympathizes with and vocalizes support for many so-called liberal or progressive directions in theological thought and political action. Without being a gadfly, he defies efforts to pigeonhole his thought, at times locating himself somewhere between Barth and Tillich!

For Douglas John Hall, “interpreting for his own time and place the very core of the faith” is the key to his vocation as a theologian. That is to say, the particular theological issues to which he has given special attention—suffering and the theology of the cross, stewardship, the disestablishment of the churches—fall under the umbrella of his concern for contextuality in theological thought. He writes in a *Christian Century* article, “I think I was among the first to employ this by-now-overworked term in theological discourse,”³ and it is his work on contextuality that arguably is his chief, and most original, contribution to the discipline. Contextuality is what shapes and conditions all those other, aforementioned concerns; nearly every one of his books touches on this matter, even when its primary focus is some other topic. Describing the responsibility to interpret the core of the faith for this time and place, he writes,

. . . it cannot be done without daring to think that one has grasped, in some authentic sense the character of one’s own epoch, one’s own *Sitz im Leben* or *zeitgeist*, one’s own context or historical moment. . .
 . . It is no theology that merely announces what was said and done

3. Douglas John Hall, “Cross and Context: How My Mind Has Changed,” *The Christian Century* 127, no. 18 (September 7, 2010), <http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2010-08/cross-and-context>.

in the past—what questions people asked in the Middle Ages, what answers theologians gave in the sixteenth century, or what concerns are held by Christians living in some other part of the world. Yes, theology has an indispensable historical component. But to become theology, not just historical doctrine or religious erudition, Christian thought must have been pierced to the heart by the pathos of the human condition *here and now*. (2005:23)

Hall's concern for context is distinct from contemporary theologians who conceive of contextuality in terms of social location—that is, they assert it is the theologian's conscious engagement with his or her own geographical location, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and so forth that is the primary context for shaping one's theological constructions. Hall is hardly unaware or inattentive to his social location but, rather than self-consciously privilege social location, which puts the theologian first, he insists on the preeminence of *theology*—and thus to that “core of the faith.” To understand why this is so, it is important to look at his personal biography.⁴

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Born in 1928 and raised in the village of Innerkip near Woodstock, Ontario, Hall left his secondary schooling at age sixteen to take a one-year course at a local business college in order to help support his financially strapped family; he was the eldest of six children. He soon found work in the business office of the local newspaper, and four years later was admitted to the Royal Conservatory in Toronto to pursue music composition and piano performance. But a year later he sensed the call to Christian ministry and was admitted to the University of Western Ontario on a probationary basis because he lacked a high school diploma.

Despite these precarious educational beginnings, Hall's academic success generated offers of graduate study from the most prestigious theological institutions in North America. He opted for Union Theological Seminary in New York City, where his teachers included such luminaries as Reinhold Niebuhr, John Coleman Bennett, and Paul Tillich. He met Karl Barth, one of his early theological heroes, when the great Swiss theologian came to the

4. For more extensive autobiographical sketches, see *Bound and Free*, esp. ch. 1, “A Theologian's Journey: Where I Have Been” (32–50); “Cross and Context”; and idem, *The Messenger: Friendship, Faith, and Finding One's Way* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010).

United States on a lecture tour. Hall also crossed paths with the likes of Phyllis Trible, Frederick Buechner, Malcolm Boyd, Walter Brueggemann, Edward Farley, and Rhoda Palfrey, who would become his wife in 1960, as well as international figures like M. M. Thomas, V. C. Samuel, and Masao Abe.

Leaving Union Seminary in 1960 (and receiving his Th.D. from there in 1963), he served for two years as pastor to a United Church of Canada congregation in northern Ontario, and then was called to teach at the newly established University of Waterloo in southern Ontario. In 1965 he was appointed to the MacDougald Chair of Systematic Theology in St. Andrew's College at the University of Saskatchewan, in Saskatoon, before moving finally in 1975 to McGill University in Montreal as professor of systematic theology.

Hall was launching his teaching and writing career during a time of enormous political, cultural, and theological ferment. Books such as Jürgen Moltmann's *Theology of Hope* and J. A. T. Robinson's *Honest to God* were roiling theological and church circles, even as the feminist movement, the sexual revolution, and student protests against the Vietnam War were overturning academic and political practices and institutions. These seminal works and events helped shape Hall's thought, moving it beyond the assumptions of his seminary education and early teaching efforts. Despite an initial resistance, he writes,

I realized after four or five years that my students had a point: theology made in Europe, however beautifully and persuasively articulated, cannot be promulgated in Canada or the United States as though it were immediately applicable, with perhaps only a few local illustrations.

I began to see how imperceptibly I, though thoroughly a child of this "New World" myself, had been swept into the powerful narrative of European Protestant neo-orthodoxy, so called. My own nation's geography, history, sociology, politics and culture had played a very small part in the evolution of my Christian understanding. What had occurred in patristic, medieval, Reformation and modern Europe had had a greater voice in my theology than had the struggle of my own ancestors for a place in the sun. Like most North American writers and preachers, I had borrowed my theology ready-made from the sufferings of others.⁵

5. Hall, "Cross and Context."

Thus, as Hall began to pursue writing and publishing as part of his theological vocation, one can see him contending with his theological mentors and heroes, breaking from Karl Barth—or at least the later Barth, whose *Christian Dogmatics* seemed to Hall too closed a system for the times—and embracing more closely Tillich, with whom he had earlier struggled, as well as Niebuhr. The theme of Hall's first book, published in Japan, *Hope Against Hope* (1971), anticipated the first of his books to receive wide attention in the United States, *Lighten Our Darkness* (1976). The subtitle used in both books was *Towards an Indigenous Theology of the Cross*. That reiterated modifier “indigenous” highlights the emphasis on contextuality as the driving force behind his thought, even as the theology of the cross supplies his theological hermeneutic. (He frequently cites Jürgen Moltmann's statement that the theology of the cross is the “key signature” of the whole of Christian thought.)

For the next decade, Hall's many books would focus heavily on two other key themes. First, in *The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age* (1982/90); *The Stewardship of Life in the Kingdom of Death* (1985/88); and *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship* (1986), he rethinks stewardship for a post-Christendom age. His reframing of this classic Christian topic relates directly to his second major theme, the disestablishment of the churches (as in, for instance, 1980's *Has the Church a Future?* and 1989's *The Future of the Church*). He applies the theology of the cross directly to issues of theodicy in *God and Human Suffering: An Exercise in the Theology of the Cross* (1986), which proved to be one of Hall's most widely read books. Together, these books proved popular with theological faculties, pastors, as well as general audiences and thus helped establish him as a favorite lecturer at seminaries and churches in the United States.

In 1989, Hall launched one of the most ambitious theological publishing projects of the final decades of the twentieth century: a three-volume systematic theology published with the common, overarching subtitle *Christian Theology in a North American Context*. The first volume, *Thinking the Faith*, focuses on theological method, and is Hall's most extended and in-depth exploration of the place of contextuality in theological thought. It is here that he works out most explicitly how Christian theological ideas and traditions derived primarily from northern Europe change when they are set within the context of the United States and Canada. The content and implications of Hall's argument are further developed in the trilogy's second and third volumes, *Professing the Faith* (1993) and *Confessing the Faith* (1995). These latter books look more specifically at classic theological topics such as the Christian doctrine of God, anthropology, Christology, ecclesiology, mission, and ethics.

Many reviewers misunderstood *Thinking the Faith* when it first appeared, arguing that a book on theology “in a North American context” should naturally examine the diversity of contemporary nonwhite, non-European theologians. They were puzzled when Hall deliberately focused on the admittedly mostly white-male European heritage shaping Western Christian thought in North America, and some were angered by his relative inattention to feminist thought, African American religion, and liberation theology. But Hall was guilty of neither oversight nor ignorance. Rather, he was arguing that such critical examination of our “immigrant” theological roots within the North American context is essential if we wish to construct theologies fit for postmodern Christians in an era of disestablishment, diversity, and pluralism, while remaining true to the cross of Christ. Thus, *Thinking the Faith* is arguably the pivotal book in Hall’s catalog, the volume most essential to understanding his overall theological project.

Although one does not detect great shifts in his thought over the years, his books do demonstrate how his key concerns adapt specifically to the events, movements, and cultural circumstances contemporaneous with the time of their writing. For instance, in *Lighten Our Darkness*, written in the mid-1970s, he examines the theology of the cross in the light of Watergate, Vietnam, nuclear threats, and the communist bloc. Later, in *The Cross in Our Context* (2003), Hall analyzes the theology of the cross in light of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, American imperialism, the collapse of the communist state, and the climate crisis. Both books offer a common understanding of the cruciform nature of Christian existence, but one refracted through a changing context.

Following completion of the trilogy, Hall’s subsequent books have been shorter and more thematic, including several collections of essays and lectures, such as *Bound and Free* (2005) and *Waiting for Gospel* (2012). One notable exception is *Why Christian? For Those on the Edge of Faith* (1998), in which Hall attempts a Christian apologetics through the conceit of a quasi-epistolary dialogue between a searching student and his theology professor. Here we see Hall as he is best known to many of his readers, as a beloved mentor gently and unapologetically prodding his protégés to deliberate, disciplined theological thought. One of the reasons Hall is so popular with pastors and many mainline seminary professors is his profound respect for his audience; he has a way of making his reader feel smart without ever stooping to cheap flattery or overt ingratiation. It is clear that his humble roots prompt him to identify deeply with his interlocutors in the churches.

ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK

In highlighting the role of contextuality in Douglas John Hall's theological project, I in no way discount those concerns for which he is best known, most particularly the theology of the cross or disestablishment of the churches. Indeed, many recognize him first and foremost as a "theologian of the cross" or a "prophet of disestablishment," and discount the place of contextuality relative to those. Hall surely does not immediately embrace those labels, though he cannot utterly disavow them either. But his concern for theological accountability always drives him back to the *hic et nunc*, to that which conditions how we read.

Thus *Douglas John Hall: Collected Readings* does not attempt to be a comprehensive overview of his thought or publishing oeuvre. It focuses solely on his works published by Fortress Press. Moreover, it does not aim to summarize his ideas or serve as a general introduction to them. Rather, it attempts to show how contextuality governs Hall's principal concerns, particularly the theology of the cross and church disestablishment. Thus the readings put fresh attention on his theological method. While several excerpts from *God and Human Suffering* and *Professing the Faith* emphasize theological "content," many more are taken from *Thinking the Faith*, *Confessing the Faith*, and *The Cross in Our Context*, which highlight the contours and implications of disciplined theological thought, and press readers to devote themselves more wholeheartedly to that discipline. The excerpts have been lightly edited, mostly to remove irrelevant phrases, add clarifying words, or delete unnecessary notes. The introductions to each piece attempt to put the excerpt in context, both within Hall's thought, and within the plan of the book itself. In some cases, the selections may leave the reader with more questions, in which case I hope they will feel prompted to revisit—or discover anew!—the original works, which remain fresh years beyond their publication. The bibliography that follows provides a complete list of Hall's published books, but does not include articles or volumes to which he was a contributing author.

Part 1, "Thinking and Knowing: Theology as Contextual Practice," explains why such disciplined theological thought remains crucial in our day and age, considers the relationship of theology to faith, and begins to describe the context in which we are engaging it in that praxis. The closing chapters in this first section examine the relationship of thinking to knowing, revealing the various "modes" of knowing and how such knowing is part and parcel of our spiritual being.

Part 2, "The Crucified God and the Suffering Christ: Theology in the Context of the Cross," delves more explicitly into theological topics, such as

the place of tradition, the theology of the cross, the relationship of suffering between God and Jesus, and soteriology.

Part 3, “Ecclesiology and Ethics: Theology in the Context of Disestablishment,” looks more closely at the place of the church in our modern context, and the purpose of disestablishment. Hall has always asserted that theology and ethics are inseparable, and so the final essays in the book focus on that relationship, closing with a chapter on the Christian vocation as “Stewards of the Mysteries of God.”

Together, these excerpts also paint a selective, impressionistic portrait of one of the most beloved and influential North American theologians of the past forty years. Douglas John Hall’s accomplishment is marked by the gracious eloquence with which he urges us to think—carefully, deliberately, expansively—and thus to bring our own contextualized voices to proclaim the gospel that the church—and the world—has been waiting for. He has gifted us with an enduring method for doing that essential work, and a canon that deserves our ongoing attention, for its concerns will surely not disappear anytime soon.

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project. I was a novice editor at Augsburg Books in 1988 when I was asked to proofread *Thinking the Faith*; if any book has had a life-changing effect on me, it is this one. Even though I had over six years of seminary training in my back pocket, Hall's work was in many ways the real beginning of my theological education. Over the next ten years, Hall and I worked together on several more books, and in the process we formed a friendship that has now lasted for a quarter-century. I am deeply grateful for the legacy he leaves us, to which I feel compelled to return again and again.