

11-1-2006

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David Schnasa Jacobsen

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Recommended Citation

Jacobsen, David Schnasa (2006) "The cross in our context: Jesus and the suffering world," *Consensus*: Vol. 31 : Iss. 2 , Article 22.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol31/iss2/22>

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The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World

Douglas John Hall

Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003

230 pages. \$17.60 Softcover

The pre-eminent Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall has written yet another important book for North American Christians to read. This book, *The Cross in Our Context*, represents a brief summary of his massive three-volume systematics work from a few years ago. Yet this book is in fact more than a summation. In this book Hall pursues the problem of a theology of the cross with incredible rigour across many important theological topics: theological anthropology, ecclesiology, mission, and eschatology. Its brevity and accessibility make it a useful volume for theologians and pastors alike. In the process, Hall seeks to acquaint readers with the “thin tradition” of the theology of the cross (relying with some frequency on Luther) and to make a case for its value in developing a contextual, North American theology.

For Hall, the theology of the cross is not just another theological topic. One does not dispose of it by devoting a certain moment of theological reflection to Christ and his cross – typically matters taken up in theological loci like “Christology” or “Soteriology,” which considers how it is that Christ saves. Instead, Hall views the theology of the cross as a “key signature” for all of theology. To take the theology of the cross seriously is to force one to come to terms with a theological anthropology that is more tensive, and ecclesiology and missiology that is decidedly non-triumphalistic, and an eschatology that is something other than a kind of projection of a “will to power” splayed across a dispensable cosmic backdrop. Readers will recognize throughout the book the way, conversely, a theology of glory has inadvertently formed how we think of ourselves as human beings and corporately as the church. In this sense, Hall makes this “thin tradition”, so un-loved in the history of church and theology (Paul, Luther, and Moltmann being exceptions), accessible in ways more powerful than the negations one usually associates with the theology of the cross. Readers will benefit from this thorough-going, truly systematic way of hearing theology through the strange, sometimes minor key signature that is the theology of the cross.

Two critiques of the book come to mind, although they are minor. In the section on eschatology Hall seems to rely on a familiar

caricature of canonical apocalyptic writings and their relationship to the rest of the canon. He might have benefited in his chapter on eschatology from consulting more recent Biblical research on the topic instead of using it as a mere foil for his thought. In fact, some would argue that a Pauline theology of the cross is in itself somewhat apocalyptic; see, for example, Alexandra Brown's *The Cross and Human Transformation: Paul's Apocalyptic Word in 1 Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995). He might have found there a more fruitful conversation partner. A second critique concerns a writing style that can be a little demanding. Occasionally the book engages in rather lengthy, convoluted sentences that make the reader's task more daunting. Nonetheless, the book is well worth it. North Americans, and especially Canadian Lutherans, may just find Hall's "Way of the Cross" a way not only of contextualizing our theological task but pointing a direction forward out of Christendom and into a renewed life of faith free to let go of the blandishments of a theology of glory and willing to find life in its opposite, Jesus' own cruciform shadow.

David Schnasa Jacobsen
Waterloo Lutheran Seminary, Waterloo

A Matter of Life and Death: Preaching at Funerals

Charles Hoffacker

Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 2002

112 pages. \$15 Softcover

Charles Hoffacker, an Episcopal priest in Port Huron, Michigan, has written a fine book on one of the most important of "occasional" sermon forms: the funeral sermon. Although many pastors sense the importance of ministry at the time of death and find great meaning in articulating the Gospel in the face of death for the grieving, there are precious few print resources that push preachers more deeply into that task. This book is one of them.

One reason for Hoffacker's unique success is his insistence on the importance of the Good News in funeral preaching. In an age when the eulogy and personal remembrance for its own sake have all