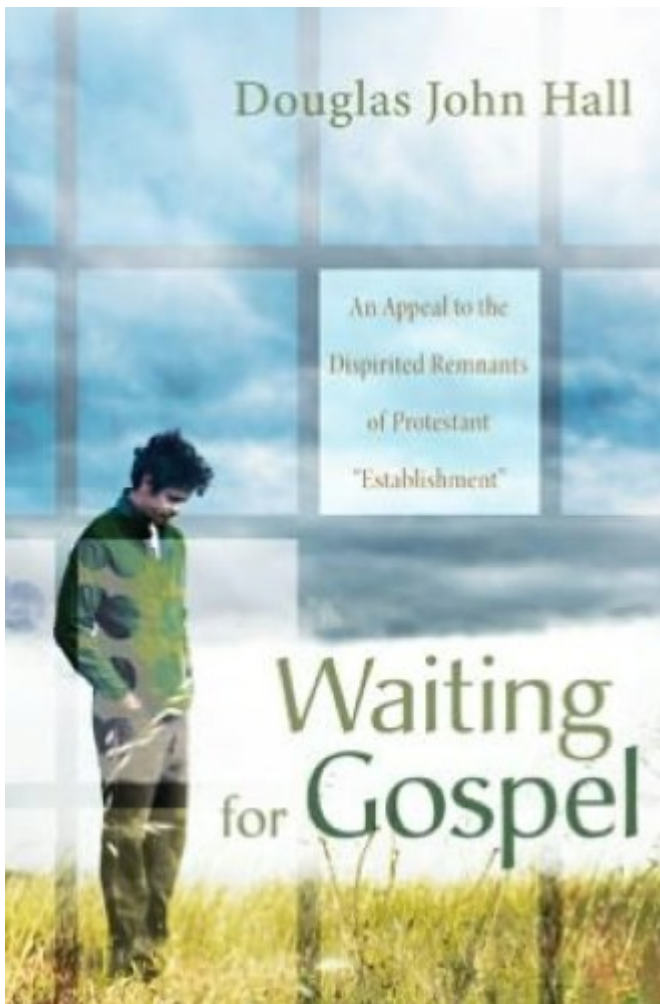


Spirited remnant

by [Walter Brueggemann](#) in the [January 9, 2013](#) issue

In Review



Waiting for Gospel

by Douglas John Hall
Cascade

Douglas Hall is likely the most respected, perceptive and influential North American theological interpreter from a Reformation perspective, especially with reference to Luther. He continues, moreover, to filter his thought through the work of his

graduate school teachers at Union Seminary, Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr. But he is his own man and carries his inquiry toward the demise of Christendom, and thus well beyond the work of his teachers. This book of 13 essays witnesses to Hall's rigorous, uncompromising engagement with our theological crisis into his old age.

We do well to parse his subtitle carefully. *Waiting for Gospel* is a reflection on the disestablishment of establishment Protestantism, of which Hall counts himself among the remnants. He recognizes that many cardholders in that establishment are now dispirited because they bet too much on the establishment assumptions of prosperity, entitlement and influence. They are humbled by the loss of that status and unable to think about how to be church in altered circumstances.

Hall has good reason to notice disestablishment. In his home province of Quebec he has watched the downfall of the Roman Catholic hegemony almost overnight, as the church lost credibility because of scandal and disengagement:

In Montreal, where more than fifty churches, many of them cathedral-sized, are for sale, and where the once-numerous religious orders are bereft of new recruits, citizens have grown accustomed to the idea that Christianity belonged to another epoch. But Quebec is unique only in terms of the incredible haste with which secularity has set in; it only began, at most, half a century ago.

For Hall that loss in Quebec epitomizes the disestablishment that is pervasive on the larger scene.

Although Hall addresses the "dispirited remnant," he is by no means dispirited himself. He is acutely aware of the loss, but the writing of this book indicates his readiness to think through faith in and for a new circumstance, and his capacity to do so.

The word *waiting* in his title has a double-edged usage that gives away his pivotal claim. On the one hand, he has no doubt that the culture around us is waiting for gospel. (Note that he does not use the definite article *the*, which would suggest a fixed package.) The culture is not waiting for the tired clichés and compromises of the institution, but for the news of God's transformative grace and mercy. On the other hand, Hall's usage of *waiting* signifies awareness that the church does not have or possess the gospel, but must always wait to receive it yet again in fresh, contemporary, radical terms of gift and task.

The waiting of the culture and the waiting of the church are thus not the same, but they are coincident factors before the mystery of God's generous gifts. The wait for gospel offers a contrast to the old Christendom, in which the church possessed the gospel and did not need to wait—and in which culture was weary of the reductionism of the church, which offered no compelling response to reality. The wait specifies the new context of both culture and church.

Hall's book falls into roughly two parts. The first part is a series of essays that are more or less programmatic. His critique concerns the systemic reductionism of both evangelicalism and liberal pietism, two traditions that have reduced the gospel to ethical urgency or been so preoccupied with public issues of justice that they have not paid attention to the mystery of God in the life of persons.

Hall thinks that mystery has been lost through a dumbing down of faith and an overreliance on "portable lists" of obedient effectiveness that he calls "jokes." His judgment on such common practices is this:

Mysteries as profound as the crucifixion of the incarnate Word cannot be talked around in sermonettes! . . . But when such "jokes" take over the religious realm, and when (as in the United States today) these jokes can occupy revered attention of millions of "true believers," those for whom the language of the gospel is not in the least jocular are left wondering how they can use that language now, without betraying at once themselves, their traditions, and the thinking public they hope to address.

Hall insists that serious theology has been overrun by popular, one-dimensional thought. The dense mystery of God requires rigorous, disciplined, informed theology, an alternative to simplistic evangelicalism and reductionist liberalism, which have nothing new to say. With a compelling appeal to Karl Barth (not Barthianism!), Hall contends that recovery of the bold preaching of God's grace—not in didactic or militant advocacy, but simply in testimony—is the way in which the church must make its claim amid disestablishment. Such preaching, however, requires more rigorous theological work than is now common among us.

The remainder of the book is an unpacking of this thesis with reference to particular contemporary challenges. These several passionate essays and the venturesome thinking they represent have evoked in this reader a sense of freshness and vitality.

In an essay on good and evil, for example, Hall takes up the old Niebuhrian thesis concerning moral ambiguity and the temptation to “moral absoluteness or, more simply, moralism.” He finishes with the statement of Joseph to his brothers (Gen. 50:20) and voices this refusal of settlement: “Our evil is not thereby justified; but it does not have the last word. Nor does our goodness.”

In the next essay, which I find the most compelling in the book, Hall probes again Luther’s theology of the cross with “eight terse observations.” In this he returns to his early and perhaps best book, *Lighten Our Darkness*. Here he relates the theme to Bonhoeffer and says that Christian theology is a work of humility that never arrives at closure:

There is for Luther (nor Bonhoeffer) no Hegelian synthesis; the dialogue continues; theology does not end; there is no complete work. As I have sometimes put it, with Christian theology you have to keep talking, or else somebody will believe your last sentence. Last sentences always require further sentences to prevent their misappropriation. Because what one is trying to describe, in theological work, is not a What, not an object, but a living Subject, and our statements about this subject are doomed to be wrong.

Hall does not leave Bonhoeffer safely in the orbit of Hitler, where we usually find him. He continues to press the topic of the cross in considering the case of Rwanda and the complexity of violence that is always the subject of the gospel.

For good reason, the essay on the cross and “the ethics of participation” is followed by one on Christianity and empire. Hall probes the way in which empire requires religion, and he discusses what empires “find attractive about Christian religion.” But then he turns from his nice interface to the urgency of prophetic faith. Wise as he is, Hall warns against “the ideology of an *a priori anti-imperialism*.” He judges that at the present time the church must be at the edge of empire with a “preferential option” for the marginalized.

Hall finishes with a whimsical reflection on a visit to a megachurch that, he finds, embodies all the seductions that characterize U.S. religion generally. His response to that experience is a series of alternatives à la Peter Abelard:

Affirmation, Sic/Presumption, Non;
Immediacy, Sic/Folksiness, Non;
Jesus, Sic/Jesus-ism, Non;

The Cross, Sic/Substitutionary Atonement Theory, Non.

The megachurch, he concludes, is in the kind of bondage that Luther warned about.

One might, at first glance, judge that Hall is simply an old white guy doing cerebral theology that is remote from the immediate challenges of contemporary life. Hall is indeed an old white guy! But given my sense of congregational life, I judge that he has drawn very close to the crisis of faith that daily confronts serious churchpeople. The challenge, it seems to me, is to find a place to stand from which to engage the frantic survivalism, the endlessly picky small-bore demands and the usual business of small-time personal rubs that are uncritically contained in ideology. Given such a daily menu, the depth and wonder of grace get lost in the shuffle of keeping on. Hall provides the reader a way to think differently and, eventually, a place to stand in freedom.

For Hall, old as he is (even older than this reviewer!), this is no doubt the last book . . . until the next one. The next one, like this one, will be welcome. What Hall shows us is the urgency and possibility of our moment for offering another performance of the old drama whereby the way that is not our way gets a hearing. The work continues, and Hall gives nourishment for the task.