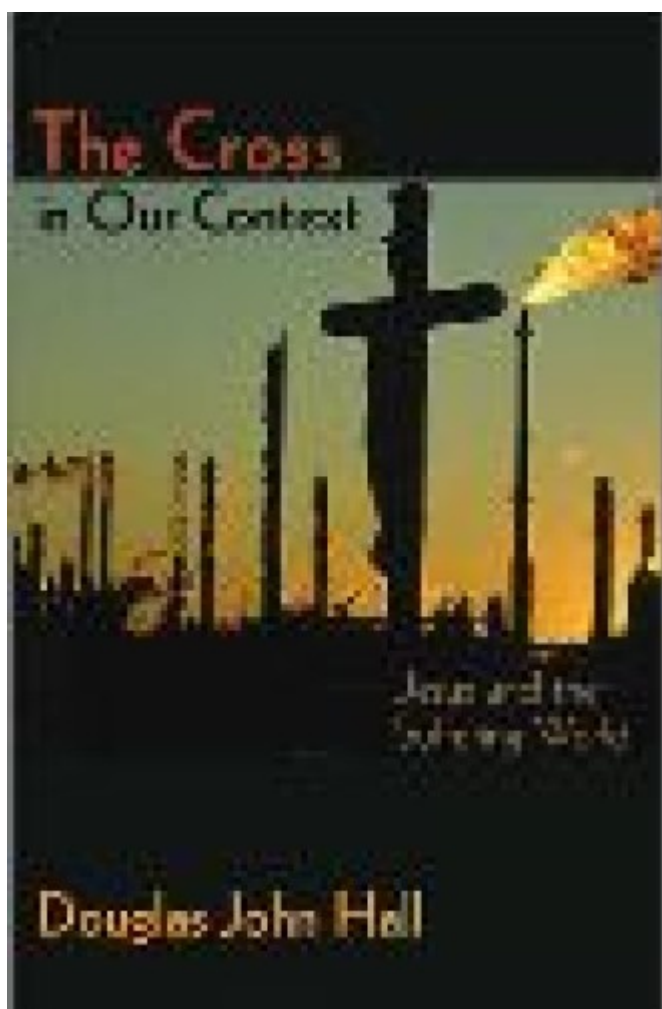


The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World

reviewed by [Roger E. Olson](#) in the [July 13, 2004](#) issue

In Review



The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World

Douglas John Hall

Fortress

If Douglas John Hall is right, the gospel has been almost eclipsed by Christian triumphalism. This theology of glory seeks to know God directly through reason, experience the grace of God without suffering, and expand Christendom through pretentious evangelism rather than live the story of the crucified Jesus in the midst of a world in agony.

Hall, emeritus professor of theology at Montreal McGill University, is a well-known, highly regarded and prolific Protestant thinker who has focused on issues of suffering, evil, costly discipleship and the cross of Jesus Christ. Here he draws upon the themes of his earlier books, and relies heavily on such theologians of the cross as Martin Luther, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Jürgen Moltmann.

Hall's book is organized as a mini-summa of Christian belief; its unifying motif is Luther's *theologia crucis* set in contrast to the *theologia gloriae*. Hall focuses on the contemporary world, a world marked by ecological crisis, extremes of poverty and wealth, fanatical ideologies, resurgent religious fundamentalisms, commercialism and consumerism. Each major locus of systematic theology is subjected to the criterion of the crucified God revealed in Jesus Christ, which here becomes a canon within the canon, the touchstone of truth, and the critical principle for discerning the correct shape of Christian belief and life.

According to Hall, triumphalism has been the bane of Christian existence and of the church since the time of Constantine, and it continues to plague us. For example, both the religious left and right refuse adequately to acknowledge the cultural disestablishment of Christianity in the West and to recognize this as good and right. Hall issues a severe warning to the growing "new Christendom" of the Southern Hemisphere. It must guard against the triumphalism that seeks to dominate culture and is inconsistent with Christianity's central and controlling symbol. The cross calls Christians not to domination but to identification with the suffering and weak of the world.

Hall's critique is a much-needed corrective to contemporary trends in world religion. Unfortunately, he aims it almost exclusively at conservative religious groups and ignores (or only acknowledges in passing) its manifestations among liberal, mainline religious movements. Clearly, Hall disdains pietistic world-denial, quietism, fundamentalism, apocalypticism and the consumerist mentality of the megachurch movement. But is any appropriation and recommendation of the theology of the

cross complete if it does not turn its critical principle inward to examine one's own religious life and theology? One wonders what tendencies toward triumphalism Hall might discover lurking in mainline Protestantism.

Luther is the hero of Christian theology in Hall's account of the ups and downs of the gospel throughout two millennia. And yet Hall's description of the way of life required by a theology of the cross does not fit well with Luther's dogmatism (e.g., in his debates with Erasmus, Zwingli and the Anabaptists) and his willingness to allow the state to persecute religious dissenters and minorities.

As I read this book I could not help thinking of the Anabaptists, who truly embodied the humble, suffering servanthood consistent with a theology of the cross. What other movement in Christian history since Constantine has so adamantly rejected triumphalism and so joyfully accepted persecution and suffering for the sake of the gospel? Yet Hall never mentions it.

One reason Hall neglects the Anabaptists may be his strong assertion that the theology of the cross requires Christians to embrace and live out a world-and-life affirming spirituality. But many Anabaptists would argue that they *are* life-and-world affirming, even if not in the manner expected by Hall and other apologists for the magisterial Reformation. Yet Hall offers a valuable corrective to every religious tendency to view discipleship as withdrawal or retreat from engagement with history. His treatment of traditional doctrines will certainly not satisfy most conservatives; his Christology is ambiguous at best, and his neglect of the resurrection is worrisome. Nevertheless, the prophetic challenge that this book offers is worthy of consideration by all types of Christians.