

**‘FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD...’  
THE STORY OF GOD’S WORK ON EARTH  
ACCORDING TO DOUGLAS JOHN HALL**

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**Abstract**

*This essay reconstructs the way in which Douglas John Hall tells the story of God’s work. The argument of this essay is that Hall’s entire theology could be described as an exposition of the famous formula in John 3:16, “for God so loved the world”. His emphasis on a theology of the cross is explored with reference to the doctrines of creation, humanity, providence, redemption, the church and the eschatological consummation. It is argued that Hall’s strength (his Christological focus on a theology of the cross) is also his weakness, given his underdeveloped pneumatology. It would therefore be important to further investigate Hall’s understanding of the filioque problem.*

**Key Words:** Economic Trinity, Douglas John Hall, Theology of the Cross

**Introduction**

Douglas John Hall is often described as one of the most widely read contemporary North American theologians. It is easy to understand why this is the case. He writes with sincerity, there is a clarity of style in his writing, he is explicit about the North American context but is sensitive to global problems, he draws widely on contemporary art, literature and films, he engages critically with contemporary expressions of Christianity and (consumerist) culture and an eminently pastoral approach to theology is evident throughout his writings.

Hall was born in Canada in 1928. He is Professor of Christian theology emeritus at McGill University in Montreal, Quebec. A critical distance from the United States of America, given his Canadian context, is evident in his work. His theology is evangelical in the spirit of Karl Barth, geared towards an analysis of and a theological response to contemporary culture in the style of Paul Tillich, and sensitive to that which is particular, especially the suffering of the other, following the Bonhoeffer’s example (three of Hall’s main mentors).

Hall has written extensively over a period of more than four decades. For the purposes of this contribution I will focus especially on the trilogy that constitutes his magnum opus, namely *Thinking the faith* (1989/1991), *Professing the faith* (1993) and *Confessing the faith* (1996) as well as his own synopsis of the argument in *The cross in our context* (2003).

How is Hall telling the story of God’s work on earth? Hall is evidently fond of stories and commends Elie Wiesel for suggesting that God created human beings because God likes stories (1991:91). He describes theology as ‘the meeting of stories’<sup>1</sup> (1991:89). This

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<sup>1</sup> Hall adds: “The wonder is that Christian theology could so soon and so thoroughly have devolved into conceptual and perceptive expressions which have little in common with either the historical narratives of the

ongoing 'meeting' refers to 'God's Story of the World' and the stories of humanity. He suggests that the prominence of stories in the biblical texts indicates an 'impulse' towards the particular and a hesitation to generalise and universalise (1991:149).<sup>2</sup> Theological reflection on the Christian 'profession' of faith entails commentary on this story in the hope of illuminating aspects of that story. Hall insists that great stories always transcend the commentaries upon them and warns against the tendency to attribute more finality to commentary than that warrants (1993:29).

Theological commentary on this story allows for attention to specific aspects of this story as may be appropriate in a particular context and at a particular time. Hall's comments in this regard are worth quoting at some length:

If anything is central to the narrative core of this tradition, it is the story itself – the whole, unfolding drama of God's venture, the creation, with its historical and natural dimensions, its diverse inhabitants, and the always surprising interactions of all of its personages and components. It is of course God's undertaking, and therefore God is always prominent in the story. But as in a drama the action constantly shifts from one centre of concern to another, so biblical faith does not lend itself to permanent concentration upon any one centre, not even God. As for theological midrash on this story, concentration will fall upon that aspect of the whole to which attention is evoked by contextual realities (Hall 1993:346).<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, Hall does not adopt a storytelling approach to the core themes of the Christian faith. One may observe that his approach is not so much systematic but characteristically correlational (following Tillich's)<sup>4</sup> and therefore contextual. The approach which he follows is one of relating the core Christian message, the proclamation on Jesus Christ as the crucified, and an analysis of various dimensions of the contemporary context.

In the next section I will offer some reflections on Hall's point of departure in relating these themes of the Christian faith to one another. This is not a difficult assignment since Hall is quite explicit on the leitmotif underlying his theology, namely a theology of the cross. This is articulated in his trilogy but also in his own reflections on this trilogy in *The cross in our context*. On this basis, I will reflect in subsequent sections on the logic according to which he introduces the themes of creation, the emergence of humanity, the legacy of human sin, God's providence, redemption, the formation of the church, its ministries and mission and the consummation of God's work.

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Older Testament and parts of the Newer, or the parabolic approach favoured by the rabbi Jesus" (1991:89). In a footnote he clarifies that narrative and conceptual approaches to theology can complement one another in the same way that story requires commentary – as epitomised in the rabbinic traditions. Narrative helps theology to escape from formulating a set of a-historic propositional truths while conceptual reflection helps theology from fragmentation into a plethora of interpretations.

<sup>2</sup> This impulse towards the particular is balanced precisely by an emphasis on context, namely on that which surrounds the particular text – which accounts for an impulse towards the whole. Hall suggests that the direction of this impulse is towards recognition of the universality of the divine love. See Hall 1991:150.

<sup>3</sup> Hall argues that the affirmation of creature-hood constitutes such a concentration in the present North American context – while a theocentric focus may have been appropriate within neo-orthodoxy.

<sup>4</sup> See Hall's own distinction between kerygmatic and apologetic approaches to Christian theology (e.g. 1991:333367, 2003:59f). He offers an excellent critique of Tillich's method of correlation, suggesting a) that it assumes harmony between the human situation and divine relation on the basis of a prior metaphysical commitment to an analogy of being, b) that there is a tendency towards abstraction in his discussion of the context that does not do justice to the particularity of Tillich's own historical context, and c) that this led to the absence of an awareness of his own location. Nevertheless, his own theological method maintains a similar tension between gospel and world, albeit that it is more tentative and less systematic than that of his mentor.

### A Theology of the Cross

In *The cross in our context* Hall (2003:6) notes that “In all of my previous works, both written and spoken, it has been my hope to enunciate for myself and others the depths that I have felt in this ‘never much loved’ (Jürgen Moltmann) theological tradition that Martin Luther insightfully called the ‘theology of the cross’.” He adds that the aim of this volume is to show how each aspect of Christian doctrine is affected when viewed from the perspective of a *theologia crucis* (2003:7). This is indeed also the explicit point of departure for his trilogy on Christian theology in a North American context (see 1991:22f). The structuring principle of a systematic theology can scarcely be expressed more explicitly!

The following aspects of Hall’s exposition of a theology of the cross may be identified here:

- a) *Triumphalism*: For Luther, a theology of the cross stood against the *theologia gloriae* of the papal Christianity of his time. Hall translates this with the term ‘triumphalism’. He defines that as “the tendency in all strongly held worldviews, whether religious or secular, to present themselves as full and complete accounts of reality, leaving little room for debate or difference of opinion and expecting of their adherents unflinching belief and loyalty” (2003:17). He adds that a theology of glory “confuses and distorts because it presents divine revelation in a straightforward, undialectical, and authoritarian manner that silences argument, silences doubt – silence, therefore, real humanity. Yet just in this it confuses and distorts, because God’s object in the divine self-manifestation is precisely not to overwhelm but to befriend” (2003:20). It distorts the human condition through a vain boasting of human potential and is thus unable to express a deep compassion with human weakness and wretchedness (2003:21). This results in an overly systematic theology which articulates the internal coherence and propositional content of the Christian faith with greater sophistication than its subject matter warrants. It too easily suggests the permanence of a body of theological truths that betray the livingness of God. It seldom does justice to the fragmentation, the brokenness of human existence (1991:46, 69-72). It succumbs to the religious temptation for security, finality, the comfort of absolutes (1991:72f, 95). Drawing on Luther, Hall emphasises that God hides from us in revealing Godself to us and that God’s otherness from us is found not in the distance but in the proximity to us (in Jesus Christ).

Hall diagnoses such triumphalism as the malaise of Christendom in North America (see Hall 1996:201ff) – which has been unable to distinguish itself from Western imperial powers expressed in the hegemony of the neo-liberal global economy, in American military power, in the American dream ‘from rags to riches’<sup>5</sup> and in the cultural imperialism of consumerism.<sup>6</sup> Hall’s implied readers are those trying to come to

<sup>5</sup> Hall (1991:40) notes the simplicity of the dreams of the first European settlers in North America who were “for the most part, the Third World of their times, poor and marginalized people, pushed out of the Old World by the political, technological, and religious upheavals of their epoch, and by economic forces over which they had no control. They appeared on these shores not as Hobbesian lords and masters of the universe, but as the victims of ideologies and worldviews, who turned to this frontier as their only hope, their last resort: Their dreams were mostly modest dreams: they sought a place in the forest where they could raise their children, earn their bread by the sweat of their brow, and worship God in their own manner.” Hall is sceptical as to whether the humility of this modest vision can still be retrieved.

<sup>6</sup> See Hall’s comment: “Is it Christianity that has taught us to love consumption and overabundance and waste? Is there some link between our trust in God and our astonishing prosperity, our being ‘First,’ our superpowerdom?” (2003:50). He adds that, if it is not Christianity that has taught us to pillage the earth, if that represents a distortion of the Christian faith, what precisely is Christianity then and to what would it lead, if it is really tried and tested (2003:52)?

terms with the heavy burden of guilt that this analysis suggests.<sup>7</sup>

- b) *The plight of the victims*: The theology of the cross may be understood as a response to the many victims of such imperialism. The testimonies of the victims offer one important guideline for discerning the signs of the time (1991:134f). In all of Hall's writings the theme of suffering is never far from the surface. In this sense his theology is a thoroughly pastoral one. He insists that no Christian theology can avoid the problem of suffering, not because Christianity manifests a morbid interest in pain, but because there *is* disintegrative pain: "The world is full of pain and God loves the world" (2003:32, also 1991:33). This concern with suffering is most explicit in Hall's *God and human suffering: An exercise in the theology of the cross* (1986). He observes that certain aspects of what we call suffering (loneliness, the experience of limits, temptation and anxiety) are necessary aspects of God's good creation (1986:54-55). These have to be distinguished from the tragic dimensions of life which are related to human sin. This is what prompts his concern with the many faces of human suffering. Hall is quite sensitive to the victims of imperialism – which include the oppressed people of the world, outside but also inside the North American context. The victims, one may add, also include those who align themselves to the powerful (which would require the liberation of the oppressors). Hall is also sensitive to the plight of non-human victims of the global consumerist culture.

This concern with human suffering is important in order to understand the pathos of Hall's rhetoric. He engages with his North American readers to persuade them that the way of the cross, and not Christendom, is the key to Christian existence, to their own salvation and to peace and justice in the world.

- c) *World-affirmation*: For Hall the incarnation and the cross symbolises God's own affirmation of the worth of God's creation. It is worth so much to God that it is worth dying for. A rejection of triumphalism does not imply a denial of that which is worldly; a concern with the plight of the victims is precisely aimed at allowing God's creatures to flourish. The pathos of Hall's whole theology is to affirm God's love for the world (*kosmos*) and to counter a form of Christianity that is docetic, idealist, world-denying and retains the abiding Hellenistic suspicion, perhaps even the Manichaean disdain for matter (see Hall 1990:255). Drawing on Bonhoeffer, he urges that the world must not be prematurely abandoned. He says: "This world, for all its pain and anguish of spirit, in spite of its injustice and cruelty, the deadly competition of the species and their never wholly successful struggle to survive – this world is the world for which God has offered up his 'only begotten Son'" (1990:120). World-affirmation for Hall means to "affirm a material and finite creation, with all the vulnerability that that entails" (1993:311).
- d) *Contextuality*: A theology of the cross is for Hall necessarily contextual. The cross is a Christian symbol but it refers to a historical and therefore contingent event (2003:35). The cross has been planted in a particular place and time. A theology of the cross therefore drives one towards more variety, less finality, greater specificity and concreteness. Only on this basis can a theology of the cross become recontextualised. This allows one to ask how we may perceive in this world, here and now, the presence of the crucified one (2003:42). This allows a theology of the cross to address particular forms of triumphalism

<sup>7</sup> In an interesting comment, Hall (2003:49) observes that, "As the aftermath of September 11, 2001, demonstrates, among other things, we are rather relieved when it becomes possible again to blame some other enemy for earth's malaise; for then we no longer have to face that subtle enemy within our own corporate self."

and particular victims of imperialism. As Gregory Baum (1990:37-38) notes, “The aim of a contextual theology is not simply to find an indigenous expression of the Gospel, but to understand the culture of the place in terms of the forces that threaten it, make it unjust and inhuman, and call for rescue and transformation.”<sup>8</sup>

In all of Hall’s work, but most notably in the subtitles of his trilogy, he emphasises that he is specifically addressing the North American context. From a South African perspective it is this honesty and specificity that allows one to recontextualise his work within another context. It is also noteworthy that the emphasis on contextuality in his work is not merely an epistemological recognition of the rootedness of all theological discourse in a particular context.<sup>9</sup> Since this indeed is true of all theologies, South African discourse on contextual theology as a claim to authentic theology soon became stranded.<sup>10</sup> Instead, Hall’s emphasis on contextuality is rooted in his understanding of the historical contingency of the cross. A theology of the cross is therefore not merely one form of contextual theology. It forms the basis for the recognition of the contextuality of theology (see Hall 1991:29). The context is thus understood not merely in secular but also in theological terms – as the world which God loves and does not abandon. It is, accordingly, also the locus of the mission of the church.

- e) *The symbol of the cross*: The cross serves for Hall as an indicating of the heart of God. God is not interested primarily in power or glory but in loving and being loved. This implies vulnerability. God has made Godself vulnerable to love for the world (2003:38). This implies that God is a God of compassion who is willing to ‘suffer with’, to stand in solidarity with the beloved creation, a ‘crucified God’. Such a God runs counter to the impulse to control, to what it is typically expected in a culture and religion of glory. Hall draws on Bonhoeffer’s words here: “Man’s religiosity makes him look in distress to the power of God in the world ... the Bible directs man [sic] to God’s powerlessness and suffering.” And: “Only a suffering God can help” (see Hall 2003:84). Such a God is surprising, unanticipated, unforeseen. Such a God has to be *revealed*. This is the basic intuition of a theology of the cross (2003:23). There we may find the clearest picture of God’s love for the world. Christology here clearly constitutes the centre of a doctrine of God.<sup>11</sup>

Hall seeks to develop his exposition of the Christian faith consistently on the basis of such a theology of the cross. He even offers his own one sentence summary of what that entails:

<sup>8</sup> See Baum (1990:39f) for an insightful discussion of Hall’s own Canadian context, more specifically as a resident in Quebec, as distinct from the broader North American context.

<sup>9</sup> Hall (1991:76) acknowledges this insight and adds that, although this is true, it should be noted that there is a form of theology which does not regard itself as being contextual, which hides its contextuality under the guise of universality (1991:77). In *Thinking the faith* (1991:93-110) Hall offers three reasons for the contextuality of theology, namely a) that is a human enterprise, b) that addresses the relationship between the living God and a dynamic creation and c) that theology assists the repeated confession of the church. He also notes the dangers of contextuality, namely a) relativism following from the quest for any kind of theological relevance, b) the possibility that the context can determine theological decisions through an accommodation to cultural trends, c) a lack of catholicity and ecumenicity when theology becomes too narrowly focused on its immediate social location, and d) a preoccupation with the *kairos* for the sake of immediate relevancy that precludes biblical exegesis and historical reflection.

<sup>10</sup> See, especially the various contributions to a *Festschrift* for Albert Nolan, entitled *Towards an agenda for contextual theology* (Speckman & Kaufmann 2001).

<sup>11</sup> Hall emphasises that the person of Christ cannot be reduced to descriptions of, or accounts of, or reflections on this person. Christian doctrine cannot aspire to more than relative adequacy; there will always remain a ‘doctrinal flexibility’ (see 2003:113, 115f). Elsewhere (see 1991:105) he also acknowledges the tendency in Western Christianity to chain the Spirit to ecclesial Christologies.

I have affirmed that the cross of Jesus Christ represents the absolute claim upon the world of the God who creates and sustains it, that the message of the cross is that this world is the beloved of God and must not be abandoned, and that the church is that community of faith freed sufficiently from self and institutional survival to seek the welfare of the city (*civitas terrena*), to resist that which destroys it, and to steward the good within it (2003:220-1).

He immediately adds:

Such a faith is a clear denial of every continuing propensity of all types of spirituality, Christian and non-Christian, for which creation can only attain its end by passing away (2003:221).

As I will demonstrate in the discussion below, this *leitmotif* of a theology of the cross is reflected in his constructive contribution to each aspect of the story of God's work. Although, for Hall, theological reflection entails an extended commentary on God's story, he does not follow the narrative sequence for such commentary. His trilogy on Christian theology in a North American context is more or less structured on the basis of the distinction between fundamental theology (*Thinking the faith*), systematic theology (*Professing the faith*) and practical theology (*Confessing the faith*). It is nevertheless striking that the themes of church, mission and Christian hope are covered in the volume on *Confessing the faith*.

Hall's own reflections on the Christian story (in *Professing the faith*, 1993:30) are structured on the basis of three selected figures/actors involved in the drama of creation, fall and redemption, namely God, creaturely being and the Christ. In the discussion below I will, however, also pay attention to the other aspects of this narrative.<sup>12</sup>

### **God's Faithfulness to Creation**

As I observed above, Hall's theology of the cross is a contextual theology which is rooted in the symbol of the cross itself. For Hall the cross symbolises God's love for the whole of creation. Repeatedly, he insists that God, as God is manifested in the crucified one, is committed to the world, that God does not abandon the world and its creatures prematurely (Bonhoeffer). The symbol of the cross signifies that God regards the world as so good, so beautiful, so precious that it is worthy dying for (2003:24, 31). The cross of Jesus Christ is God's claim to this world, the claim of a lover yearning to love and be loved, not the claim of a despot yearning for power, control and glory (2003:37).

It is crucial to observe that, at the very heart of this affirmation, there lies an attempt to balance a theology of redemption and a theology of creation.<sup>13</sup> For Hall, the problem of a

<sup>12</sup> Although Hall is explicit in admitting that more than one structure would be possible and in focusing only on a selection of figures in the drama, the following observations may be noted here: a) The narrative of God's interaction with creation surely includes also church, mission and the hope for the completion of God's work (themes treated in *Confessing the faith*); b) The distinction between God and the Christ as two separate actors appears to be rather odd within an explicitly Trinitarian theology; c) the role of the Spirit as the energising agent in the story of God work is only implicit (Hall links redemption to the work of Christ and not also of the Spirit – see 1993:367f); d) Hall's choice of creaturely being is deliberate and seeks to avoid a narrow anthropocentric understanding of creation.

<sup>13</sup> In an interesting footnote on Paul Santmire's notion of the 'spiritual motif' according to which the world of nature has to be superseded by that which is more spiritual, Hall (1991:217) observes that such an attitude towards nature also characterises human attitudes towards history in general. Although Hall is sensitive to ecological concerns, he typically uses the term 'world' and not so much 'nature' or 'Earth'. His consistent plea is that the 'world' must not be abandoned, because God so loved the world.

theology of glory is precisely the tendency to assume that the world in all its ambivalence and fragility will be superseded through a supra-mundane redemption. In an important formulation he insists that:

...the theology of the cross is bound to this world in all of its materiality, ambiguity, and incompleteness. It will not cannot opt for a doctrine of redemption, however theoretically or spiritually appealing, that in effect bypasses or contradicts the biblical affirmation of creation. What God loves and is determined to save is not an abstraction and not a 'savable' *part* of the whole, but the real world in its inseparableness and interrelatedness. God is as firmly committed to the life of this world as that cross was planted in the ground at Golgotha, that is, (symbolically) at the very center of death's apparent sovereignty (2003:36).

A strong emphasis on the grandeur of God's creation is required in order to prevent a message of redemption that supersedes creation. He repeatedly criticises the way in which an affirmation of the goodness of creation is undermined in Gnosticism and docetism. He insists that it is this finite world, of flesh and blood, that God declares to be good.

### **The Emergence of the Human Creature**

For Hall, the grandeur of creation is epitomised in what he calls a 'high anthropology' – one where the dialectic between grandeur and misery is an asymmetrical one, where the grandeur of God's creation is weightier than its misery. He regards this as necessary in the light of the dangerously low image of humanity in late twentieth century Western culture. The rhetoric of progress, mastery and success which has elicited a "programmed optimism of the affluent consumer-driven West" is being undermined by a sense of fatalism over instabilities such as terrorism, prospects for economic collapse, deadly diseases and atmospheric change (2003:96-97). This certainly does not imply that Hall endorses a form of cultural optimism. He counters the modern faith in progress by insisting that a theology of the cross must announce the presence of God also in failure (see Baum 1990:40-41). God's providence does not promise material progress or personal success, but calls for faith, hope and love.

Hall is careful to discuss the emergence of humanity as one dimension of God's creation and not as a distinct entity alongside the world of nature. He acknowledges the centrality of human creatures for the Christian tradition but seeks to demonstrate that "the biblical concentration on humanity must not be construed as if it were an exclusive interest in the human creature" (1993:202). He affirms Moltmann's emphasis on the Sabbath, not the sixth day, as the crown of creation (1993:348). In a context where humanity has been both elevated and denigrated (through an 'immense disgust in humanity'), there is a need to stress that the concern for human well-being is one manifestation of God's concern for all creatures and for creation as a whole (1993:202). He repeatedly suggests that the gospel (as good news) in the North American context requires an affirmation of creaturehood. In this way Hall seeks both to counter the anthropocentrism of modernity and to stress the God-given capacity for responsibility of humans.

He recognises the destructive legacy of the notion of human dominion over nature and calls any unqualified reiteration of the biblical injunction to multiply and subdue the earth redundant and irresponsible (2003:202). Hall seeks to reinterpret dominion in terms of the metaphor of stewardship – a theme on which he has written three books (see Hall 1985, 1986, 1990, also 1993:344-353).<sup>14</sup> This emphasis on stewardship is for Hall a contextual

<sup>14</sup> I have offered a critical assessment of Hall's theology of stewardship in several earlier publications. See especially Conradie 2000, 2006.

one. He is not only concerned about the legacy of human dominion but also about the subsequent withdrawal from civic responsibility of well-trained human beings, sometimes in the guise of a form of nature romanticism calling on humans to draw back from their managerial stance vis-à-vis the world.<sup>15</sup> Hall thus calls for a sense of human accountability and responsibility in terms of the notions of stewardship, priesthood and discipleship (see 1993:176).

Hall sees such stewardship as a form of human agency that corresponds to God's agency towards the preservation of the fallen creation. He insists that divine providence does not render human activity superfluous, neither is human stewardship naively continuous with divine providence (1993:175).

### **The Human Predicament**

Hall's theology of the cross is also crucial in order to understand the human predicament. Here the relation between the symbols of cross and incarnation is significant. The human predicament is not merely related to what it entails to be created, to enfleshment, mortality, finitude and fragility (2003:39).<sup>16</sup> If that was the case, a theology of incarnation may have sufficed. Hall detects in much of the theology that stresses the incarnation a hidden reluctance to dwell on the cross of Jesus Christ (2003:38). The cross may help one to recognise that the human predicament is not merely constituted by death, but also by injustice, not only by suffering but also by violence. The biblical narratives on the cross highlight both the personal and the political dimensions of the human predicament with a prophetic sense of realism. They highlight the plight of the victims of injustice.

Where does such human suffering come from? Hall notes the contemporary tendency to attribute the power of evil to the accumulation of collective human wrongs (1993:220). He also notes that liberal theology has "discarded any hint of 'total depravity' in favor of sins more amenable to salvation by enlightenment and forgiveness" and has therefore been unable to grasp the depths of human alienation (1993:256). He regards the narrative of the fall as crucial for the following reasons: "...it preserved, at least in theory, the reality and goodness of creation as God's own work and intention (over against Gnostic, Neoplatonic, and other accounts); it provided an explanation for the origin of evil in the world without making the Creator directly responsible for it; and it retained in the process an anthropology that maintained at the same time the sense of human responsibility and of human victimization" (1993:221, also 1986:75f).

Hall is careful not to moralise about sin (see 1986:77). Instead, he emphasises the tragic dimension of sin – a dispensation for which humans are collectively responsible but cannot escape from (see 1986:82f). He describes sin both as an act (for which individuals can be held responsible and a condition from which no one can escape (1993:226-232). He also emphasises that the recognition of sin is only possible on the basis of a confrontation with the cross and the message of forgiveness. Sin that is confessed is always already known to be sin that is forgiven. Although he recognises controversies over original sin (2003:106), for him the deepest roots have to do with a broken relationship, with human alienation from God (2003:103).

This alienation from God is also expressed in the form of organised religion – for "the desire for God is subtly interwoven with the desire to be God" (2003:101). Hall suggests that,

<sup>15</sup> See Hall (1993:350-1) for his response to the criticisms of his theology of stewardship raised by David Hallman and others.

<sup>16</sup> Hall is sharply critical on an anthropology that focuses on overcoming human finitude, where the liberation of the soul from the body is stressed and where the emphasis is on 'training for eternity' (see 1993:276).



in terms of the biblical narratives, religion is something that God for the most part hates. This is in fact the point of Hall's sharpest rhetoric: A critique of Christendom and popular religion (the "strong compulsion to get close to Jesus") in North America. He acknowledges that Christendom was not unequivocally disastrous (it gave us JS Bach, he notes), but he insists that the disestablishment of Christendom in countries of the West provides an opportunity to liberate Christianity from the burden of folk religion (2003:168-9).

Despite this recognition of the destructive legacy of human sin, Hall insists that the distortedness of creaturely being is not the primary focus of Christian profession. Instead, he emphasises that creaturehood as such is not distortion (1993:191) and finds an unqualified and joyous affirmation of creaturely life all too infrequent in the Christian tradition (1993:282). He affirms both the essential goodness of creation (which is why God would want to redeem it) and the fallenness of creation (which is why it needs to be redeemed), but the purpose of such redemption is precisely the affirmation of creaturely being.

His position in this regard is again contextually motivated. While he recognises the need to counter human pride (the elevation of the rational animal) in the America of Reinhold Niebuhr's generation, he senses a need to counter human sloth in his own period (1993:281). He links this with the failure of human creatures to affirm their creaturehood: The tendency to become superhuman like God (pride) or subhuman (sloth) (1993:338). The problem is not only a too high view of humanity (Prometheus) but also a denigration of creaturely being (Sisyphus). White racism, male chauvinism, class consciousness, the segregation of the elderly and infirm from society and notions of technological mastery follow from the same 'high anthropology' where human distinctiveness and superiority (compared to other creatures) is stressed (1993:283). However, the dialectic counterpart of such a Promethean anthropology based on the secular rhetoric of progress in a highly competitive society is that of failure (Sisyphus). Hall observes that the elevation of the human creature is not necessarily countered by notions of human depravity. In an interesting comment he says:

No one articulated the depths of sin more tellingly than Calvin; but it may be asked whether, in the history of the world, there has ever existed a race of people more persuaded of their superior powers than are Swiss, Dutch, South African white, or North American Calvinists ... if the doctrine of the fall so bleakly and even sometimes morbidly pursued by this theological tradition really acts to check human pride and assertiveness, one must ask why it has not played a more effective part in our history (Hall 1993:270-1).

In response, Hall stresses an anthropology where there is room for human weakness, vulnerability, finitude, mortality and failure (not merely moral failure). This would counter a culture where the emphasis is on purity of will, intellectual ability, physical beauty, ability in sport (dexterity, strength, speed) and spiritual sanctity. Such an anthropology cannot emerge on the basis of triumphalist human constructions of the divine as an omnipotent super power, but only with a theology where God is revealed through the cross. He is especially concerned with the failure to perceive human life as being purposeful (see 1993:285) and a massive loss of meaning (1993:294). He finds a covert sense of nihilism (Thielicke) in the North American psyche. This is the nihilism of those who would never admit to being nihilistic but who remain indifferent, detached and uncommitted to the public good while pursuing happiness and surrounding themselves with good things (1993:293). Hall (1993:294) says: "People do not feel that as human beings they are heirs to a civilizational vision and project that transcends their personal histories. They do not hear themselves called to anything purposeful." It is to such a sense of purposelessness that he responds with a theology of redemption.

### Redemption as Authenticity?

In response to the call that the world must not be prematurely abandoned, Hall recognises the need for a thorough reworking of a theology of redemption. What is required in an age of ecological degradation is a notion of redemption that is creation-orientated, that does not imply redemption *from* creation, but the redemption *of* creation (1993:166-7). Hall (1991:223) asks: "Does salvation imply the healing of creation, or have we in Christian soteriology especially a statement about the final transcendence of creaturely existence, the emergence of a 'new creation' in which the world of our present experience is set aside in favour of something else?"<sup>17</sup> Or, to put the question in a different way, "The question is not only whether the God who creates is also the God who redeems, but whether what God redeems is the world that God created" (Hall 1993:75).

In response to this question Hall insists that redemption cannot be understood in terms of the overcoming of finitude – which he regards as the majority position in the Christian tradition (1993:271). He repeatedly criticises a narrow understanding of redemption in terms of reconciliation between God and humanity and between human beings.<sup>18</sup> He specifically criticises an Anselmian understanding of atonement as a satisfactory payment for guilt and violations of honour. He suggests that this metaphor may have been appropriate within the context of the rise of middle-class capitalism where the language of debt and payments, loans and interests was significant (2003:107). He rejects both the pietist emphasis on the redemption of the soul from the created order and the liberal affirmation (aligned to the American dream) of creation as being able to rectify its own deficiencies in order to ensure progress (divine reign on earth). But how does Hall himself understand redemption?

Hall argues that any notion of redemption corresponds to an understanding of the negative, of that which requires redemption. In a discussion of the three classic theories of atonement (following Aúlen's analysis) he notes that the church has understood the human predicament in different ways in different epochs.<sup>19</sup> In the early church the church recognised "the anxiety of fate and death", especially amongst the enslaved and responded with a *Christus victor* theology of victory over the forces of death and destruction. In the medieval period substitutionary exchange was practised at every level of society and people suffered from "the anxiety of guilt and condemnation" – to which the Anselmian theology of forgiveness and substitutionary sacrifice responded. However, to proclaim forgiveness for guilt to people whose anxiety is no longer one of guilt before God may easily serve repressive ends. Liberal theology has identified an "anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness" as lying at the roots of modernity. In response, the moral influence theory associated with Abelard suggested that salvation can come through moral enlightenment (revelation).

Hall argues that there is an abiding significance in each of these theories of redemption that may be retrieved in different periods. However, none of these theories are able to address the *problematique*, the anxiety that pertains to the dominant culture in North America. In response to the moral influence theory, Hall notes that North Americans do not see themselves as lacking love so much as lacking purpose. In response to the penal

<sup>17</sup> Hall (1993:199) also mentions the contrast between Dwight Moodie's comment: "I look upon the world as a wrecked vessel. God has given me a life-boat and sad to me: 'Moody, save all you can.'" and Hendrikus Berkhof's suggestion: "The ark was to land as soon as possible so that the earth could be newly populated and cultivated."

<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, Hall elsewhere (1993:321) describes sin in terms of alienation and redemption as the restoration of a broken relationship. He even supports this claim on the basis of an ontology of communion, following Joseph Sittler and Joseph Harutunian and an ethic based on the integrity of creation.

<sup>19</sup> Hall follows Aúlen's typology of theories of atonement and Tillich's analysis of various anxieties in this regard. See Hall 1993:415ff.

substitution theory, Hall acknowledges that guilt between humans still abounds and that North Americans cannot escape from the problem of corporate guilt. However, guilt as a form of spiritual anxiety is much less prevalent than in the time of Luther; in the realm of public morality there is resistance against 'trying to lay a guilt-trip' for middle class people in response to poverty elsewhere in the world (1993:471). Such incipient guilt is countered by what he calls the 'fatalism of the oppressor': "What most people in our context need to be saved from is not guilt but the fatalism, apathy and 'covert nihilism' (Thielicke) that allow us so quickly to repress whatever pale reminiscences of shame we feel" (1993:472). Moreover, a message of forgiveness to the guilty within the First World would be seriously misplaced: "The path to our salvation is far narrower than that. It will deny salvation to the globally guilty and cause us to confront the shallowness and pettiness of our guilt feelings; and it will carry us into dark places of the soul and of the body politic that are far more shattering to spiritual smugness than the ritualized recitations of sin that are wrung from overfed and self-indulgent penitents exhibiting their 'sincerity' in front of television cameras" (1993:474). In response to the classic theory of victory over the forces of evil and death, Hall recognises the need for the liberation of oppressors – as emphasised by feminist theologies and by North Americans in conversation with other liberation theologies. He acknowledges that such a view of redemption may be appropriate for oppressed minorities in the North American context, but argues that this would deflect the attention away from the main problem underlying that cultural context.

Hall observes that his context is one where there is indeed an anxiety of meaninglessness and despair but also a "pervasive sense of purposelessness, superfluity, boredom and escapism". He says: "For as a people we are not first and foremost either enslaved, guilty, or unloved; we are lost" (1993:480). A message for the enslaved (Christ sets us free), the guilty (You are forgiven) and the unloved (God loves you unconditionally) is therefore insufficient. Hall (1993:480) continues: "We do not believe deeply anymore in the goals that we still announce rhetorically or the 'values' that we try to retain and inculcate. We are no longer motivated by the high vision that brought us into being as a people. We have no more great expectations." He argues that this is "so profound and perplexing and unsettling an anxiety that few Christians have been courageous enough to plumb its depths" (2003:130). Hall acknowledges that a soteriology that can address such an anxiety has not been accomplished as yet (see 1993:464). Such a theology will have to account for perplexing contemporary questions around the very *telos* of human existence. What is life for? What is the purpose of our existence in the face of an indifferent universe (see 1993:533)?

In response to this question Hall develops a Christology based on the concept of 'representation' (instead of substitution). Jesus Christ represents God to humanity and humanity before God (see 1993:506-543). Here I will focus only on the question how we are redeemed through this representation before God. Hall (1993:543) summarises his position as follows:

In entering into full solidarity with us as God's anointed one, Jesus carries our humanity with him to the encounter with God, our Creator. Though the suffering that is the inevitable consequence of this encounter, we are enabled at last to accept our creaturehood to cease both trying to rise above it and trying to avoid its true calling. As we begin to experience the 'righted' relationships that are consequent upon this acceptance, we discover new meaning in our creature-hood.

He then offers four comments on this formulation:

- 1) In the notion of representation the humanity of Jesus is emphasised together with the tragic dimensions of human existence.

- 2) Jesus accepts as his destiny the representation of a creature deeply estranged from its Creator, profoundly disorientated in all of its relationships and destroying itself from within (1993:544).
- 3) Such representation becomes present within the contemporary community of faith through the Spirit (a point which is underdeveloped by Hall).
- 4) This is an encounter in which God too suffers – a suffering which is imbedded in creature-hood and in the very possibility of human failure. In this encounter God assumes the suffering of humanity and humanity assumes the suffering of God. In this encounter both God and humanity are changed and this produces the peace that passes understanding (1993:548). And that is where Hall ends his discussion of redemption in *Professing the Faith*.

In *The cross in our context* Hall offers a similar analysis of the inadequacies of the three dominant theories of redemption. His emphasis remains on redemption as the affirmation of (human) creaturehood. He explains the redemption of humanity here in the following way: “The cross reveals the compassionate determination of God to bring the human creature to the full realization of its potentiality for authenticity” (2003:107). The existentialist category of ‘authenticity’ that Hall employs here accounts for the Christian notion of ‘righteousness’ and the Protestant category of forensic justification. The point is that divine grace is not intended to turn me into something else but to make me what I am before God, to make me truly human (2003:108). To illustrate this Hall draws on the famous sermon by Paul Tillich, entitled “You are accepted” (also cf Hall 1996:277-286). The category of authenticity is perhaps best understood as a Christian affirmation of human creature-hood, with all the vulnerability and anxieties that this may entail.

### **Church, Mission and Discipleship**

A theology of cross gives rise to an *ecclesia crucis*. Hall acknowledges “that much of the Christianity that *has* taken the cross seriously has left the impression that the ecclesiological consequence of the cross is the existence of an especially devout community of belief, conscious of the need to suffer, and rather too smugly certain that its suffering renders its particularly beloved of God” (2003:137). Nevertheless, he argues that the suffering of the church is a more persistent theme in the Bible than the so-called characteristics of the church (unity, holiness, catholicity, apostolicity) (see also 1986:123f). He is careful to insist that the *telos* of such suffering is life, not death and that although such suffering is to be expected, it is historically contingent and not predetermined or destined (2003:143).

In *Confessing the faith* (1996) Hall describes the church as “that community which is being brought to live the representative life of the Christ in the world” (1996:45, 47ff). Firstly, the identity of the church need not be invented, but is called to be representative of Christ.<sup>20</sup> However, the church is not the prolongation of the incarnation– which easily becomes distorted in a triumphalist ecclesiology. This is countered, secondly, by the notion of ‘being brought’ which suggests that the formation of the church has to be understood pneumatologically. Thirdly, the calling of the church suggests a missiological emphasis. Fourthly, there is a temporal and eschatological dimension in ‘being brought’. The church is a *communio viatorum*, a community on the way; it has not arrived (1996:49).

Hall describes the church in terms of a theology of the cross as a “community impelled

<sup>20</sup> In *Professing the Faith*, Hall (1993:506-584) explains the person and work of Christ also in terms of the category of ‘representation’.

(pushed!) toward the world despite its own resistance and reluctance” (2003:183). The church forms a disciple community, a community of confession, an alternative community, which exists under the symbol of cross and is therefore alien within the world, despite or perhaps precisely because of its commitment to the world that God loves. Christian life in a post-Christian context can therefore be described in terms of the notion of sojourners (see Hall 1996:265f). Hall says:

The Christian is a stranger in the world, never quite at home in it, because he or she remembers and hopes for a righteousness, justice and peace that the world does not know, though it is of its essence and the very thing towards which it is daily beckoned. Yet this homelessness must not tempt the Christian into otherworldliness, whether of the religious or the secular utopian variety; *this* is the world God loves, and it must not be substituted for some other, no matter how desirable (Hall 1990:112).<sup>21</sup>

Hall describes Christian mission in terms of the category of world-orientation (1996:150f). Christian mission participates in and expresses God’s love for the world. Christian mission therefore provides another indication that God does not abandon the world. He describes Christian mission as God’s work (*missio Dei*): “Christian mission is premised upon the belief that the triune God is already present and active in the world and that the church can only follow, so far as possible, this prior, extensive, and only partially comprehensible mission of God” (1996:153).

In this way Hall seeks to counter the (sometimes militantly) expansionist view of mission that forms the assumption of a theology of glory. He also wishes to counter the typically other-worldly orientation of American-style mission and evangelism campaigns. Instead, Hall emphasises that the church’s mission is inseparable from an ethics of resistance and worldly responsibility (see 1996:332f), the ministry of the whole people of God, discipleship and stewardship. He suggests that a Christian *communio viatorum* may participate in that by ‘living the story’. That implies vulnerability and the risk of engagement. More specifically that requires ‘telling the story’ (evangelism) and, on that basis, ‘confessing the faith’ (see Hall 1996). Confession is the church’s mode of world-commitment (1996:33). Confession entails both acting and being, words, deeds and stance. Hall adds that within the North American context such confession is hampered by the church’s association with middle-class religion. The problem is that Christian mission in this mould remains inseparable from the bourgeois quest for transcendence and happiness (1996:181).

### Creation’s Future

Eschatology, one may argue, is an extrapolation of soteriology. This also applies to Hall’s position on eschatology. If the purpose of redemption is to demonstrate God’s abiding commitment to this world, then eschatology has to do with the future of creation. If redemption takes place through the crucified one, then hope is not based on God’s power and glory but on the resurrection of the crucified. If redemption seeks to address (at least for Hall) the crisis of purposelessness, then eschatology is a reflection on the meaning and purpose (*telos*) of creation (including human purpose). Here Hall employs the double-sidedness of the English word ‘end’ which includes both the connotations of purpose and termination (1996:469f, 2003:209). For Hall, reflection on the *telos* of creation is the primary concern. The primary human predicament is not death but purposelessness. The

<sup>21</sup> Hall does not explore the tensions between the notion of the church as sojourners (*paroikoi*) and the notion of the stewardship (*oikodome*). See Conradie 2005:220-223 for a discussion in this regard.

problem is not death, but life (2003:129). The question is not “Is there anything after death?” but “Is there anything before death?”

What, then, is the *telos* of creation, the purpose of a process which we may now recognise to have both a beginning and an end (see 1996:471)? Hall argues that the *telos* does not lie only in God (as in docetism), but it does not lie purely within the world itself either (as in secularism and liberal assumptions about progress). Instead, Hall suggests that, “We believe, as disciples of the crucified one, that the essential goodness of the world, its nature and its history, cannot be thwarted, for God is committed to it in long-suffering love” (2003:224).

Hall argues that Christian hope expresses a dissatisfaction with what is. It heightens our awareness of what is wrong with the world (2003:217). A theology of the cross is based on hope not sight; it anticipates that God's work will be based precisely on the cross. By contrast to the self-assured optimism (the ‘cheap hope’) of a theology of glory and its inverse, a notion of cultural despair and the abandonment of any hope to save the world (Hall mentions American fundamentalism and right-wing apocalypticism), an eschatology based on the cross therefore cannot fully grasp that which is to come and remains necessarily tentative. We do not know how and when the world might end; we can only trust in the God whose creation it is (2003:229). From the perspective of the Giver of life, the purpose of creation cannot be catastrophe and destruction; it can only be understood in terms of an affirmation of life and the hope for consummation (see 1993:357). Christian hope does not rest in the processes of world history, but ultimately in Godself (1996:497). In the interim, such trust puts a renewed emphasis on a sense of human *telos* and subsequently on human vocation.

Hall explores a number of classic eschatological questions on this basis, namely in terms of creaturely destiny, God's faithfulness to creation, a critique of docetism and an appreciation of the materiality of our existence (1996:500f, 2003:213). In addressing these questions he avoids speculation and seeks to remain true to his emphasis on a theology of the cross, that is, the stark reality of death on the cross.

### **Concluding Comments**

From the above it should be clear that Hall's entire theology could be described as an exposition of the famous formula in John 3:16, “for God so loved the world”. The *kosmos* which God loves, is God own creation and is not prematurely abandoned by God. God's love for creation, as expressed in the incarnation, ministry and cross of Jesus Christ is a suffering love, aimed at addressing suffering in the world. This ‘for’ has numerous implications for Christian communities following ‘a theology of the cross’ – in terms of stewardship and discipleship.

As a reformed theologian who seeks to reinterpret the content and significance of the Christian faith in the light of ecological concerns there is much in Hall's work that I find highly attractive. Nevertheless, there are a number of questions which I would like to address to Hall. These questions have to do with theological themes which Hall either emphasises or does not emphasise. Such emphasis is often a matter of context and rhetorical thrust. What Hall wished to communicate to his affluent North American readers in the 1990s may be relevant to (affluent) (protestant) (South) African readers a decade later only in some respects.

- Hall's concern to counter a theology of glory leads him to emphasise God's vulnerable love and to refrain from a discussion of God's transcendence and God's power. He thus emphasises the humanity of Jesus more than the divinity of Christ. This is clearly

attractive. However, from the powerlessness that characterises the African context, a soteriological retrieval of a theology of power may perhaps be required. Such a retrieval power should be neither reductionist (where God's power is merely a metaphor for human power) nor dualist (where divine agency is unrelated to human agency). Perhaps a retrieval of the African concepts of 'spirit' or 'vital force' may prove helpful here.

- Such a retrieval of a theology of God's power may require more attention to a soteriology that emphasises God's victory over the forces of evil and not only an affirmation of creaturehood. Such a soteriology is pertinent in a context of ecological collapse and would also speak to the many forms of suffering on the African continent. Without such a notion of redemption as overcoming the forces of evil, there is a real danger that Hall's notion of redemption can be reduced to existentialist categories of self-actualisation.
- Hall's emphasis on a theology of the cross is necessary in order to counter a North American theology of glory. This is crucial in the context of American militancy, in a world after 9/11 and where neo-liberal capitalism still reigns supreme. However, a theology of victory over these very forces of evil would perhaps require a stronger interpretation of the resurrection of Jesus Christ than what Hall offers (see 1993:388-390). He tends to reduce the resurrection to its impact on the disciple community since he does not wish to engage in debates on the 'physical' resurrection of Jesus (see also Wilson 1999:89).
- Hall's high anthropology of stewardship clearly seeks to emphasise human responsibility in a context where human sloth and apathy is as problematic as human arrogance and domination. He has perhaps done more than any other theologian to retrieve the category of stewardship in order to address environmental concerns. However, he has not responded to widespread criticisms that the metaphor *as metaphor* assumes a bygone feudal dispensation in the same way that the 'kingdom of God' speaks to a monarchical context.<sup>22</sup> There can be no doubt about the need to affirm human responsibility, also within the African context where blaming everything on external forces has become a lame excuse to address Africa's problems. What is not clear is whether biblical metaphors such as stewardship or priesthood would serve such human responsibility the best.
- The most troubling aspect of Hall's oeuvre is perhaps his underdeveloped pneumatology. Although he is sensitive to the distortions caused by Christocentrism and wishes to retain a fully Trinitarian theology, his theology of the cross prompts him time and again to focus on the figure of Jesus Christ. There is no section in his trilogy where he discusses the person and work of the Holy Spirit in any detail. This has important repercussions for the way in which Hall tells the story of God's work on earth. His version of the story is more or less complete but not fully integrated. It is the presence of the Spirit that unites the story of God's work of creation, redemption, the formation of the church, Christian mission and the fulfilment of Gods' work. For example, redemption is regarded, especially in the protestant tradition, as the work of God's Spirit on the basis of what Christ has done. Hall's own emphasis on human vocation, discipleship and stewardship requires a stronger pneumatological account.
- This begs further theological reflection on the relationship between Christ and the Spirit (the *filioque* controversy). It is interesting to observe that the theme of God's Spirit has become especially prominent in the work of contemporary ecological theologians such

<sup>22</sup> See Conradie 2007 for a discussion of such criticisms.

as Jürgen Moltmann (1992), Denis Edwards (2004), Sigurd Bergmann (2005) and Mark Wallace (1999, 2005). Suffice it to say that a retrieval of a theology of the presence of God's Spirit may allow for other perspectives on diverse themes such as the human body, the flourishing of Pentecostalism, political processes, other religious traditions and ecological wholeness. This lack of attention to pneumatology may also account for a weakness in the volume on *Confessing the faith*. Here Hall offers an analysis of the world and explores the role of the church as the confessing community, but does not translate this into confessing to the problems faced by the world (see Wilson 1999:91).

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