

Theology of the Cross, the Melody of Three Books for Review

Colleagues,

Three books came my way for review at the end of summer. At first glance they all looked different. But now that I've read them, they are all singing the same tune, theologia crucis, the theology of the cross.. Here's the evidence. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

David Schneider. ARROWS OF LIGHT. DEVOTIONS FOR WORLDWIDE CHRISTIANS. Kearney, Nebraska: Morris Publishing. 2005. Paper. 305 pp. \$10.

Art Simon. REDISCOVERING THE LORD'S PRAYER. Minneapolis: Augsburg Books. Paper. 135 pp. Online \$9.99.

Douglas John Hall. BOUND AND FREE. A THEOLOGIAN'S JOURNEY. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. Paper. xii, 156 pp. Online \$17.

Three senior citizen Lutheran theologians, though one disclaims the Lutheran label, give us food for thought, and for edification. This trio of "seventy-somethings," each coming from a distinctive workworld in the life of the Christian church—overseas missions, prophet for the oppressed, academe, respectively—share with us what they've learned—and hope we won't forget—about faith and life grounded in the theology of

the cross.

David Schneider is flat-out pastoral. He's preaching to us in daily parcels (never more than two pages) from a near half-century as missionary in the Philippines, Mexico, South Africa and most recently in Kazakhstan. His devotions are regularly linked to slice-of-life episodes of his ministry in those places, his encounters with "worldwide Christians." We learn early on that missionaries don't always do it right, David included. Right alongside the episodes where the Gospel "clicked" as liberating Good News for people he served and for himself, he tells of boo-boos that he regrets, glitches that smothered the Gospel. Such remorseful encounters prompt him to say: "Looking back with clear-eyed hindsight, I begin to see things I could have said... Why didn't I...? Why didn't I . . .?" So he needs for himself the same Good News he's called to proclaim. "I struggle with the feeling of failure but finally am led again to Jesus Christ . . . wounded and bruised for my sin and failure. The message I speak to others is also the medicine for my own failings."

The "uppers" of his pastoral experience are more plentiful than "downers," though often these too are linked to grisly realities. E.g., the fate of a white fellow Lutheran, who with his wife had just been guests in Schneiders' home at the "black" seminary in Kwazulu-Natal, and was murdered on the way home, victim of the racial wars in apartheid South Africa. We learn how the gospel did indeed work as balm in that gory Gilead—for the survivors, and for us as Dave crosses that same Gospel over to us readers. Some of these life-slices, though ultimately not laughable, are nevertheless humorous. E.g., the storm-tossed young woman he rescued from the street during a typhoon in Manilla, (after he'd driven the visiting Missouri Synod president back to his hotel) who, as she jumped into the car, offered him "anything, anything you want" for his

kindness. He couldn't remember a single seminary class where anything like this had been a case study.

The Schneiders once hosted a Crossings workshop during their time in Mexico. Dave had gotten a taste of Crossings during a sabbatical and asked Marie and me to "come on down and do one with us." Though it was just for an extended weekend, we met his people, worked with them and saw Pastor Dave in action. His pastoral work there shows up in these pages as he "crossed" God's law and promise to the sinner-saints of Guadalajara—including the pastor himself—and then invites us to "go and do likewise."

The title "Arrows of Light" signals that not all is bright and beautiful among worldwide Christians—both preachers and parishioners. But, as St. John tells us in the prologue of his gospel, "in the Word made flesh, the light is shining into the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it." Page after page Dave switches on THE Light. For your own illumination from these arrows of light, contact Dave directly at <djschnitz@juno.com>[\$10 plus \$3 p&h.]

Art Simon is a dear buddy of mine from seminary days a half-century ago. >From his first pastoral assignment with the poor in a New York City congregation, he has been a voice crying in the wilderness of our American culture, a voice for the rejected and neglected. These are the very folks whom Katrina put in our face again, now 30-plus years since Art left parish ministry to become founder and head honcho of BREAD FOR THE WORLD, a Christian political advocacy group that has benefitted millions of the world's poorest people. His book by that same title, a manifesto for the movement, won the national Religious Book Award (1975). The wilderness in which he's been preaching is not only the ironically empty desert of American affluence,

but also the hearing malady of American churches. They show themselves more tuned in to the overtures of that affluent culture than to the voice of the One who “taught us how to pray” the Lord’s Prayer.

Art takes us through that primal prayer, probing its depths while also weaving it into the threads of his own biography after, lo, these many years. There is no hype about his mastery of the Lord’s prayer. His opening chapter is “A Confession. Let me tell you the unflattering truth. For most of my life I found the Lord’s prayer boring. Of course, that says much about me and nothing about the prayer. I grew up with it from infancy [his dad was a Lutheran pastor], and studied its petitions in confirmation class—first my own, later those I taught. I appreciated its theology, but praying it didn’t especially move me.” Of course, it was always used in church, and “rattle it off we did.”

But then “something happened [that] I had assumed would never happen to me, something that violated every bone in my Lutheran body. My wife wanted out of our marriage. I’ll say more about this later, but the point is that this personal adversity compelled me to pray as I had never prayed before. It made me think more deeply about many things I had taken for granted, including my truly desperate need of God. In the process I discovered the prayer of Jesus to be a hidden treasure.”

“It became a DOOR that opened a way of coming to God for healing. I began to realize that the prayer has more to do with listening to God and living in God’s presence than with speaking to God. It is more about purpose than about talk. The prayer now helps me want the right things and let God guide my life. This, I believe, is what Jesus intended when he presented the prayer to his disciples. He was not saying ‘Look, boys, you can do this in twenty seconds,’ though he did tell them that

piling up a lot of sanctimonious words is the wrong way to pray. Instead, in a few simple phrases he opened the way to a life of hope deeply rooted in God."

"In this book I offer some personal reflections on the Lord's Prayer. It is not a scholarly analysis, but thoughts from a journey still in progress. . . . On the pages that follow I want to tell you as simply and clearly as I can how this prayer speaks to me, in the hope that it will enrich your life in God. Perhaps you too can rediscover its extraordinary power."

That's what Art sets out to do—and he does it. His book is not a "here's how to do it" petition by petition, but "here's what each petition now does for me—and my journey is still in progress. My hope is that it can help you on your life's journey too."

*Douglas John Hall claims not to be a Lutheran He says he's happily at home in the Reformed tradition, even the Canadian version thereof in his native land. Which is ironic since he is doubtless the most widely-read English-language advocate of Luther's theology of the cross. Which theology of the cross is, he says, the "key signature" in which he has written all his theology. Later on he says that it is not only the key, but the "cantus firmus," the melody, "of all my thought and writing." He borrowed that "key" metaphor from Juergen Moltmann, also a happy-to-be-at-home theologian in the Reformed tradition. Also a major spokesman for theology of the cross in his classic book of a generation ago, *THE CRUCIFIED GOD*, a bizarre expression also coming from Luther. Moltmann says in that book (quoting W. von Loewenich) "Luther developed his *theologia crucis* as a programme of critical and Reformation theology. *Theologia crucis* is not a single chapter in theology, but the key signature for all Christian theology. It is a completely*

distinctive kind of theology. It is the point from which all theological statements which seek to be Christian are viewed."

Despite his own disavowal, you wonder, is he is, or is he ain't, a Lutheran? He rubs it in by titling his book with Luther's own paradoxical pair of terms for Christian Freedom, BOUND AND FREE. And why does he tell us he isn't? It may come as a surprise to some of you dear readers that I'm not going to touch those questions. Instead I'm "just" going to make a pitch for this book, his own "looking back" over his life and work. The three core chapters of the book (80 of 130 pages) were initially lectures delivered to ELCA pastors in New England: "A Theologians's Journey: Where I Have Been, Where I Am Now, The Journey Ahead."

Some (almost) asides in his story fascinate, yes, even jolt.

- 1. How Canadians are different, not at all clones of US citizens with an occasional quirky accent. "Decidedly part of our national character [is] that we have an innate awareness of the real difficulty of the human enterprise and an innate skepticism concerning schemes and dreams that minimize that difficulty."*
- 2. How his own "exceptional ear for music" shaped his theological journey. "Neither of my parents were musical; my father was tone-deaf, in fact, so I know perfectly well that it is sheer gift." How does that gift play out? Here's one way: Anglo-Saxon music "draws heavily on the MAJOR keys Life, however, is often written in the MINOR key. No once-for-all resolution in some major chord." Theology of the cross is theology in the minor key.*
- 3. How the theology of the cross finds few hearers in the USA (and Canada too) where the chronic optimism of Anglo-Saxon culture finds theologies of glory much more*

attractive. Even in the churches.

Hall's first big splash onto the theological scene was his book 30 years ago proposing an "indigenous theology of the cross," i.e., indigenous to North America. Its title: *LIGHTEN OUR DARKNESS*.

Darkness? Our optimistic national faith in the USA doesn't believe we have much darkness. That's the problem of the others. And if it does surface in our land now and then, we can fix it, and in principle the fix is easy. It just takes money. Witness the US binge to "fix" what Katrina wrecked. 200 billion should do it.

Cross-theology first off probes the darkness, listening for, and then listening to, God's voice in the chaos and catastrophe. These are always variations on God's own *cantus firmus* "you have been weighed and found wanting." Theologies of glory can even respond to Katrinas with "days of prayer" professing our faith in God despite what "nature" did to us. But that demonstrates our deafness to God's voice to the darklings when Katrinas come. Jesus' own ear heard a grim message when God sent darkness. His counsel: Except ye repent, you shall all likewise perish. Theology of the cross has a place for repentance. Glory theologies do not.

One more thing. Hall's third chapter "The Journey Ahead" is a feisty set of vexations for Christian theologians who are coming on the scene. Here's his proposed agenda: *Moving Beyond Christendom, Hospitality Toward the "Other," The Necessity of Jesus, The Human Vocation in the Midst of Creation*. And finally his call for *A Thinking Faith*.

In that first book on an indigenous theology of the cross Hall admitted that cross-theology was a "thin tradition" throughout the 2000-year history of the Christian Church. But it is the

theology that is worth giving one's life for—as did the Originator in his body on the tree. Hall urges us readers to follow in His train.

Summa: *All three of these (real or crypto) Lutherans, now goldie-oldies, are theologians of the cross. All three weave that theology into their own life stories—in world missions, in appealing for and with the oppressed, in the halls of academe. A trilogy of autobiographical theologia crucis. You don't find that everywhere, but you do find it here.*