

Biblical Theology Bulletin

How is the suffering and death of Jesus to be explained? What is its meaning for Christians today and how has it been interpreted through the centuries? These questions guide the writing of this book and its author, Vitor Westhelle, a systematic theologian at the Lutheran School of Theology, Chicago.

Drawing on Luther's insights, Westhelle explores what it means to be a "theologian of the cross." The book's focus is twofold: a sketch of the historical development of the cross motif through history which sometimes led to its domestication (chapters 1 to 4), and a summary of thematic implications of a theology of the cross (chapters 5 to 10). "My intent," writes Westhelle "is to evoke the scandal, the shame of exposure, the danger of a memory that never ought to be edited down or beautified" (xi).

In the early centuries, Ebionism, Arianism, Docetism and Gnosticism became key theological responses to avoid the scandal of the cross. These are explored in the first chapter. Ebionism and, later, Arianism claimed that Jesus was less than fully divine and hence saved God from being reduced to weakness or finitude through the death of Jesus. On the other hand, Docetism and Gnosticism emphasized the divinity of Jesus to the point that underplayed his humanity and thus his suffering; Jesus did not really suffer. These tendencies have received a renewed expression in recent decades to sublimate and domesticate the cross's scandal. Westhelle names these tendencies dolorism, defeatism, resurrectionism and cynicism, and reflects upon them in his final chapters. Erich Dinkler captures the cross's domestication well: "We are today ... so accustomed to the symbol of the cross--be it as a symbol of Christianity, or as a symbol of secular humanism as in the Red Cross or the Blue Cross or even as a political emblem--that the scandalous in it, and the scandal itself, no longer seems to strike us" (10). Westhelle seeks to help us get inside this domestication, to recognize the penchant to be untouched by the cross's truth, and to find themes and theological insights that can break open the cross's scandal and truth.

In a final chapter Westhelle revisits the Franciscan tradition of the Stations of the Cross. The traditional Stations were a circular meditation that glorified suffering and agony with a gaze only on the cross. Westhelle suggests that the Stations can move beyond this dolorism to reveal the concealed side of the cross, the symbol of the tomb. On the one hand, a fixed gaze on the tomb, the place of hidden suffering and emptiness, can also lead to defeatism. This is the desire to cope with tragedy that becomes locked in sorrow and tragedy. On the other hand, argues Westhelle, the concealed side of the cross can move us in

hope to encounter the transformative power of hope at work in the midst of defeat. This is the true encounter with the resurrection: God's power that empowers within the human condition.

Vitor Westhelle's *The Scandalous God* is a challenging read especially for those not conversant with theology. It is insightful, penetrating, and at times confronting. This is a difficult book to summarize in such a short review, especially given the depth of its investigation and the range of theological insights that Westhelle covers. He helps to unmask the theological traps which we have fallen into throughout history and today, in our attempts to avoid confronting the cross's scandal. In the true sense of the meaning of "scandal," it is clear how the story of Jesus' passion and death has been a stumbling block for Christians through the centuries. Westhelle's reclamation of the Lutheran theology of the cross, of the importance of theologizing from the underside of history and the perspective of those who suffer, offers an important voice today. This is especially pertinent given the diverse cultural and theological positions that have emerged in recent decades and a tendency amongst some towards religious fundamentalism. This fundamentalism is one response to human suffering and ecological fragility that avoids social engagement and ecological responsibility. Westhelle offers here an alternative response that enters into the heart of tragedy, pain and suffering through an authentic theology of the cross.

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