

BOOK REVIEWS

The Scandalous God: The Use and Abuse of the Cross. By Vitor Westhelle. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006. 180 pp.

This book is a masterpiece of theological reflection. Most importantly, it looks to Luther's conviction that a theologian of the cross calls a thing what it is. For Westhelle, such speaking is truthful indeed only if it leads to an "orthopraxis," a practice of solidarity with the pain and suffering of the world (112). If there is any method to be found in such a theology, it is one that consistently honors the fragmentation found throughout human experience that allows for no artificial unification.

In other words, the cross subverts any system. It leads us, rather, to honor God in Sabbath-rest and suffer with and for the oppressed. Westhelle teaches us that theology is always done from within a sustained *tentatio*, spiritual attack or trial, which permits no roses to be placed on the cross through any artificial atonement theory or comprehensive system. The cross attacks the very core of the theologian. Westhelle finds congenial echoes of his understanding of the cross not primarily in dogmatics or philosophy but in poetry and story. From these he constructs a "theory" of the cross.

Various strands of liberationist thinking are so deeply internalized with Westhelle's decades-long reflection on Luther that it becomes difficult, indeed impossible, to disentangle his reflections on Luther, liberationism, and his own concerns for the nature of beauty and a meaningful life. That this book cannot easily be labeled as representative of current theological schools is due to its genius. For those interested in Luther, we here encounter unquestionably and unabashedly the subversive Luther, who remains the guide to challenging decaying idols.

The first chapters are historical in nature, surveying the tendency to resolve the tensions of the cross as it became a symbol of Con-

stantinian power. Likewise, the scandal of a victimized God has made thinkers discount either Jesus' full divinity (Ebionism) or full humanity (Docetism). The cross, however, is clothed in apocalyptic contours that can only convey, and be conveyed by, paradox: God's presence is in absence; only the lost can be found. For that reason, nothing is outside the realm of God's works, no matter how ugly or unacceptable (27). Indeed, God's love is so profligate that God is even capable of being the "denial of God" in the cross (31).

To encounter the cross is to live on trial; this lends itself to a certain way of doing theology (36). When with Luther we see divine justice as "knowledge of Christ" (39), we must affirm that analogical thinking alone is inadequate for theological reflection. The development of analogies between the world and God, so crucial for most theological systems, is punctured and riddled by irony which disturbs any transparency within analogy (44). This is because suffering, cross, and death give only a deficit that undercuts our ability to offer God anything to balance the economy of justice. Grace subverts all human ways, making the poor, outcast, ill, and non-doers, ready to count on God's grace (55). This invitation to the outcasts opens God's grace to all, even those with worldly power.

Westhelle contends that the masters of suspicion, Marx and Nietzsche, together with Hegel, offer insights into the nature of the cross. However, they fail to ask: what can I know of God in the face of the cross (75)? For that matter, Westhelle might have added: what can I know of humanity? Jesus suffered because he named the cause of suffering, the law that kills (90). Not only sin but also the law itself hinders a relationship with God. Faith alone can connect us with God. When law is acknowledged to have no salvific properties but only benefit for establishing good social order, then we must acknowledge that human power can never be the sufficient reason for the social conditions of knowledge. Human knowledge, properly understood, is not merely a reflection of human control over the world but must also include a critique of all human attempts at domination. Nor can we see beauty as a univocal epiphany, which would be tantamount to idolatry. Even suffering and evil are not beyond

God's infinity in light of the cross (101). With Luther, Westhelle affirms that God cannot be God until he first becomes a devil.

All that said, the cross is the other side of resurrection and vice versa. We flee from God, and the mortification found in both accusation and hiddenness, only to find refuge in God's grace and mercy. This God of the resurrection truly saves us, but not so as to make us safe or to make suffering evaporate, but so that we might wrestle for our suffering neighbor in an ambiguous world.

Westhelle is concerned that evangelical theology and preaching be ever mindful of context. His theology takes us into the streets of a world that justifies gross inequities and violence. For Westhelle, the doctrine of justification conveys not only existential depth but also social and political breadth.

Westhelle's book merits careful attention by theologians and pastors. It takes us beyond the unhelpful polemics between "existential" and "political." We can profit from the help provided here that forges a path beyond those old dichotomies.

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The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church, volume 5: Moderatism, Pietism, and Awakening By Hughes Oliphant Old. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004. 620 pp.

Attempts to gauge the tenor of preaching in any era will inevitably face a difficulty endemic to the task: deciding whose sermons will serve as the era's homiletical exemplars. If one chooses a renowned preacher's sermons, one must deal with the fact that such a preacher's fame does not automatically make those sermons representative of what was preached from Sunday to Sunday in a broad spectrum of congregations. One would need to show how that same preaching style or content was taken up by much less well-known preachers in one-horse pulpits. Then one could assert that these famous preachers' work truly can be called representative of a wider movement.



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