

A stinging critique

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [January 11, 2011](#) issue

In the late 1970s a colleague handed me a copy of Douglas John Hall's *Lighten Our Darkness: Towards an Indigenous Theology of the Cross*. "I think you'll like this," she said. I didn't so much like it as find myself challenged and stretched by it—as I have been by every book Hall has written and as readers are likely to be by his [essay](#) in this issue.

Hall was a sharp critic of institutional religion in *Lighten Our Darkness*, and so he remains. What most people hear from the churches, he wrote in 1976, "is a positiveness that is phony and ridiculous: a bright and happy message that has all the depth of a singing commercial." He wrote those words before the emergence of market-based megachurches or the prosperity gospel industry. His critiques sting, but I have always found them to be honest and to spring not from self-righteousness but from a humility grounded in the mystery of God and in a hopeful longing for the church to be the body of Christ on earth, doing the things that Jesus did.

I still turn to *Lighten Our Darkness* for passages like this: "The theology of the Cross declares God is with you—Emmanuel. He is alongside your suffering. He is in the darkest place of your dark night. You do not have to look for him in the sky beyond the stars, in infinite light, in glory unimaginable. He is incarnate. That means he has been crucified. For to become flesh, to become one of us, means not only to be born but also to die, to fail."

Hall taught theology at McGill University in Montreal for years and obviously loved not only the lonely discipline of the scholarly life but also the daily interchange with students and faculty. Along the way he regularly produced books I have found helpful, including *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World* and *The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age*, which he wrote for the National Council of Churches in 1990 and which I pull from my shelf every autumn to be reminded that stewards and stewardship are central biblical motifs. Hall's lifelong emphasis on the mystery of God, on theological modesty and on openness continue to be relevant and a ray of hope.

I have sometimes been disappointed to meet an author in person, but when I met Hall I found him to be charming, modest and full of engaging stories. Over dinner we found out that both our fathers had worked for the railroad. We spent an hour or so swapping stories about fathers who lived by railroad time, marked by a vest-pocket railroad watch. We discovered that when we were boys, both our fathers would show up at least ten minutes early for every event, including dinner—for which he and I were notoriously tardy.