The Ecclesia crucis: 
Tillich, theology of the Cross, and the future of the Church

In Canada, participation rates in established Protestant denominations have been declining steadily for decades. Literature responding to this trend has focused either on church growth strategies, or the inevitable triumph of secularism.

Theologian Douglas John Hall, a former student of Tillich’s, suggests that the loss of privilege the Church has been experiencing in various ways in the West since the Enlightenment is a welcome and necessary reversal of the Constantinian adoption. He argues for a theology of the Cross, which is both descriptive of its current condition, and its essential identity in embodying God’s response to the world’s suffering with solidarity.

Drawing on Hall’s argument, this paper advocates the recovery of three of Tillich’s central concepts for the future of the Church. First, where the ultimate concern of the Church should not be survival, but the revelation of being-itself in the Christ, the Protestant principle serves to guide continued self-critique and reform.

Second, in an age saturated with messages of self-identity and rejection of structural authority, theonomy provides the Church with an alternative to a heteronomous recapitulation of its (waning, institutional) identity, and does so in the face of a contemporary culture of (perceived, asserted) autonomy.

Finally, for an increasingly secular (Western) world, the concept of the Spiritual Community provides a positive vision of the continued communication of revelation into the human situation.

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