

BOOK REVIEW

Charles Fensham. *To the Nations for the Earth: A Missional Spirituality*. Toronto: Clements Academic, 2013. viii + 174 pp. Pb. CA\$19.95. ISBN-13: 978-1-926798-09-7.

Fensham is Professor of Systematic Theology at Knox College in the Toronto School of Theology, where he has taught since 2002. He announces at the outset that “this book is . . . about a theology of formation—a logic by which we grow to understand who we are and what constitutes us as people” (2). Specifically, he seeks to offer a description of human identity and human destiny (valid for “all people” [3]), which nonetheless comes to more specific expression in Christian spirituality and the missional character of Christian community. Crucially, this is not a static identity, but one that involves “journey” toward God and the “other.”

Chapter 1, “Call,” explores various dimensions of God’s call to humanity, including promise, blessing, theology, fear, freedom, suffering, and death. As illustrated from the opening chapters of Genesis, “call” primarily entails questions of identity (17), whereby obedience to God forms those who so respond into a community capable of representing God’s true purposes within an otherwise “resistant” world: “In our living out of the story of creation we re-describe the world to reveal its meaning . . . By living we demonstrate the meaning of creation” (21).

Chapter 2, “Listen,” initially takes the story of Noah as an illustration of the fact that “Christian spirituality is by definition an eco-spirituality of responsibility for healing and care” for creation (37). It reflects on God’s call and blessing for Abraham as paradigmatic for blessedness in Jesus of Nazareth, engaging questions of theodicy and eschatology along the way. Again Christian community is all-important as the embodiment of

God's blessing and the means of extending that blessing over all creation: "This community begins to embody the fulfilment of the covenant and the signs of the coming reign of God." Specifically, this means "encouraging habits of life and moral behaviour that express our best knowledge of the personality and character of Jesus the Messiah. In particular, it means that our leaders must be formed in ways that encourage the widest inclusion of diversity of peoples and cultures as well as care for the creation in which we live" (49). Successive sections address such topics as "Formation of Habits" (61); "Formation for Faithfulness" (62); "Formation for the Engagement of Diversity" (63); "Formation for Sacrificial Living" (64); "Formation for Worshipful Living" (66); "Formation for Living in Our Bodies" (66), etc. It would be fair to characterize the discussion as wide-ranging, even to the point of lacking discipline; its structure is associative and repetitive rather than strictly logical, sometimes making it difficult for the reader to discern how another iteration of a given theme advances the argument of the moment.

Chapter 3, "Journey," addresses the principle of *peregrinatio pro Christi*, which Fensham initially explains as "pilgrimage for the sake of Christ" (74). Yet it becomes clear that this is equally "pilgrimage toward Christ," "pilgrimage in conformity to Christ," even—stretching the Latin preposition to its limit—"pilgrimage on behalf of Christ." Favoring Tillich over Barth, Fensham proposes that in the journey toward the "other" (both one's neighbor and creation as a whole) we discover not only our own identity but that of Christ as well:

Our journey to the neighbour as a journey to Jesus the Messiah and God is a journey that falls under the rubric of the love of God and neighbour, and it is in this journey and encounter, enlightened by the Gospel narratives, that we find ourselves. This is the heart of a theological anthropology of formation for Christian spirituality (82).

Still, this is at the same time a journey *with* the other, meeting the "other" in their own geographical and cultural context and affirming the necessary diversity of human experience:

As we lead and accompany people from different cultures on the journey of formation for Christian spirituality, listening carefully and

sharing the dimensions of different cultural perceptions are an essential part of the process and an expression of the Gospel (92).

Here and elsewhere throughout the book, Fensham illustrates his thesis with narratives from his own personal journey, whether as a young man venturing into the black townships of South Africa or visiting Rangiroa in the South Pacific.

Chapter 4 invites us to consider “Sacrament,” initially defined as “a visible sign of God’s grace for us” (108). In fact, the bulk of discussion addresses various dimensions of the Benedictine ethos of *ora et labora*—“prayer and work.” Considering, *inter alia*, “Prayer as the Journey to Obedience,” “Prayer as Eschatological Journey,” “Prayer as the Journey in Awe,” “The Journey of Sacrament as Prayer and Prayer as Sacrament,” and “The Journey of Prayer as Study,” Fensham proposes that prayer “is fundamentally sacramental as a sign of God’s grace and it includes, obedience, eschatological hope, awe, sacrament, wisdom, study, waiting, and doxological praise” (121). The difficulty here is that “sacrament” is so broadly defined as to risk emptying it altogether of its distinctive character. Whether one appeals to the definitions of Aquinas, Calvin, or the Westminster Confession, the Western church has always held that *divine* action constitutes the core of sacramental efficacy, yet this chapter proposes, in effect, that only in ongoing *human* embodiment of the divine will does God become manifest in today’s world. To be sure, Fensham is careful to affirm that “We join what God is already at work doing. We work in the capacity of participating in the reign of God rather than bringing it into being” (123). Again, “the local Christian community . . . exists to be addressed by God first. It is there to listen corporately and to respond” (157). But such statements have to be weighed against apparent assertions to the contrary: “Christians on the road of spirituality embody and create signs of the grace of God. Our communities are signs, tastes, and fruit of God’s approaching grace” (127); “A community that walks together on this road becomes a sign, a foretaste, and a first-fruit and thus a *sacrament* of the coming redemptive reign of God” (135). In other words, human rather than divine agency consistently receives the greater attention. In particular there seems to be insufficient discussion of

sacramental theology in relation to Christology or—better still—pneumatology. Indeed, the impression created is of a study poised between competing theologies: on the one hand Reformed concepts of prevenient grace, which waits upon God as the immediate cause and motivator of saving action in the world; on the other, the world of creational spirituality and an embodied activism that takes initiative to implement the priorities of God’s reign. Perhaps these are to be considered opposite sides of the same coin, but if so the theological dynamics that bind the two perspectives into a coherent whole are not worked out here in sufficient detail.

As if in response to this challenge, Chapter 5 (“Send”) proposes “to integrate the reflections of call, listening, journey, sacrament and sending in a theology of formation for Christian spirituality” (143). Again, the focus of discussion is on formation of “the church that is always emerging in the world in new ways as a sacramental sign of God’s promise” (143). Fensham once more stresses the rôle of the local faith community in mentoring and equipping its members for service in the world. As indicated by section headings, much of this material reiterates points made earlier in the study: “The Sacramental Mission of the Local Christian Community” (148), “Discerning the Missional Task of Sacrament” (155), and “The Sacramental Dimension of the Emerging Missional Church” (157); “The Local Christian Community—Sent to Call and Sent to Listen” (149), “The Missional Task of Discerning Call” (154), and “Discerning the Missional Task of Listening” (154), etc.

A brief “Postlude” re-asserts earlier contentions in bolder form, e.g., “For us to engage God’s creation as caregivers and healers—cosmic healers—is to become who we truly are. It is to re-inhabit our being” (163); “We are all **called** . . . We go in the sign of world-repair”; “In this moment of postlude, we ponder the call to become a blessing, world-repairers, earth caregivers, to all creation and all things” (164, bold word in original).

By way of reflection on stylistic concerns, one cannot help but note the somewhat idiosyncratic—occasionally inconsistent—citation conventions evidenced in the footnotes, a number of which (along with the remainder of the text) betray the need for

Review: FENSHAM *To the Nations for the Earth* R5

more careful editorial scrutiny. Most of the (frequent) typographical and (intermittent) grammatical errors throughout the book are merely incidental, although having Rudolf Otto's (here somewhat garbled) "*musterion tremendum et facinosum*" [sic] attributed to Tillich (83) rises to the level of annoyance.

It is clear that this study represents the fruit of a lifetime's reflection on the embodied character of Christian spirituality and the pivotal rôle of the local congregation in carrying forward God's mission in the world. Notwithstanding the qualifications offered above, its key contribution lies in its pastoral vision for transformative community, together with its insistence on compassionate and hopeful engagement with the "other" for the sake of God's reign.

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