

[MJTM 22 (2020–2021)]

#### BOOK REVIEW

Lee Beach. *The Church in Exile: Living in Hope After Christendom*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015. 240 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-0-8308-4066-3. \$27.00.

*The Church in Exile: Living in Hope After Christendom* is a slightly revised version of Lee Beach's doctoral dissertation completed at McMaster Divinity College. In easy-to-read and accessible language, Beach provides a theological perspective on the current state of the evangelical church in Canada. By weaving a series of examples from both ancient Israel as well as the early church, Beach presents a ministerial model for a new way forward for the church in Canada.

Beach's book is separated into two main parts. The first part provides a theological premise for Beach's use of the "exile" motif based on several biblical examples. The second part provides practical and encouraging suggestions for adapting ministry in the current context for evangelical churches in Canada.

To introduce the topic of living in a post-Christian world, Beach contrasts the prominence of the church, or at least church rituals, in the public sphere as seen in the 1967 centennial celebration of Canada with the memorial service following the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in the US where, three days later in Canada, "[no] Scripture was read, no prayers were offered, and no hymns were sung" (16). As Beach points out, while once the church stood at the center of Canadian culture, today the voice of the church is as one speaking from the margins. Beach's book seeks to provide a means for the church to live faithfully within such an environment today.

Beach ascribes the decline of the centrality of the church within Canadian culture to several elements, such as

consumerism, leading to the secularization of “Western” society. Though the scope of this study does not allow for an in-depth analysis as to what the contributing forces of this societal shift were, the end result for Beach is the reality of the church as an institution operating on the periphery of society. Beach begins with his working concept of “exile” following the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE (Chapter 2) and then focuses on “diasporic advice tales” from ancient Israel including Esther (Chapter 3), Daniel (Chapter 4), and Jonah (Chapter 5), followed by examples from the early church from Jesus’s ministry (Chapter 6) and the letter of 1 Peter (Chapter 7). The second part provides practical ministry suggestions surrounding leadership (Chapter 8), theological renewal (Chapter 9), embodied holiness (Chapter 10), embracing non-traditional forms of engagement with culture (Chapter 11), and motivating hope within the current cultural milieu (Chapter 12).

In this respect, Esther and Daniel are upheld as examples of Israelites functioning within the confines of a foreign power. In both instances, Beach makes a claim that God is present on foreign soil and that Esther and Daniel were both able to preserve and present an embodied holiness within the foreign culture. So too, according to Beach, the book of Jonah serves as an example of God’s presence in a foreign land. Jonah’s repentance in the belly of a great fish further reflects an embodied holiness representative for the nation of Israel that allows for the mission of God to be continued, or in other words, Jonah is an example of being a “missionary” to the nations (102). Beach follows these examples by providing an overview of “exilic” elements within Jesus’s ministry and the Epistles, focusing ultimately on 1 Peter where the writer “consciously understood his audience as in exile” (122).

The second part of Beach’s book is devoted to practical suggestions as to how the church can engage with culture today. As with ancient Israel, a renewed theology and image of God’s character is required when working from the periphery in culture. This move requires leadership. However, this move towards engagement with society from the periphery is not necessarily a coalescence with society, but rather, a movement towards an

embodied holiness that enters into culture. Ultimately, according to Beach, there can be a hopeful restoration of the church in Canada even in its marginal position within society today.

The examples from ancient Israel are appropriate and numerous parallels can be drawn for the Canadian context today, even though the “exilic” situation for ancient Israel is examined in only a cursory manner. Indeed, while Beach makes the concession that being “in exile” can occur even when one resides within their own land, one wonders if “exile” is the most appropriate term, both for the biblical accounts (which remain debated within scholarship—in essence, is it really “living in exile” if the majority of people chose not to return to Jerusalem for centuries after being provided the freedom to do so following the decree of Cyrus?), as well as for the current cultural situation of the church today. Perhaps the notion that exile assumes a return is the most misleading assumption. Whether or not the church should return to the central position of authority of a nation-state today is debatable. Similarly, in Beach’s recounting, evangelical churches in Canada did not experience a forceful removal from a position of power but rather experienced something of a slow drift from a relative position of influence. Of course, Beach’s provisions on how to engage the current culture in Part 2, remain applicable either way. In the end, the engagement with “culture” in Beach’s study is sometimes lost in its unique application within Canada, as sometimes “Canadian culture” is reduced to “Western empire” or a close association with the USA. While there are clearly similarities amongst “the West,” European evangelicalism remains distinct from American evangelicalism, which is further nuanced and differentiated from a distinctly Canadian context. Some greater differentiation within these contexts may be useful.

Overall, Beach provides an easily accessible blueprint for ways the evangelical church can live amongst society, even from within a marginalized position. This book is especially applicable for lay leaders and pastoral ministry students seeking to confront a more conservative church community while simultaneously engaging culture from a place of peripheral authority.

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