

**February, 2019**

**Charles Fensham, *Emerging from the Dark Age Ahead: The Future of the North American Church*. Ottawa, ON: Novalis, 2008.**

The phrase I use these days to express deep appreciation is, “That was provocative!” This book deserves that kind of kudo. It’s well-considered, well-researched, and well-written. But most important for the purpose of these book notes, it invites us to imagine reforming our communal *praxis* (the attitudes and behaviours that generate faithful consequences) of the Christian faith.

For Fensham, who teaches theology at Knox College in the University of Toronto (our denomination’s largest college and my *alma mater*), the reforming takes place in ways that bring the church more into alignment with the mission of God in the world. We come to understand that mission by coming to know the living Word of God in Jesus Christ. That understanding is constantly being formed and reformed by the Holy Spirit working among the people of God, both within and outside of the church, to further illuminate the church’s witness to the living Word found in the revealing library of books in the Judeo-Christian Scriptures. In addition, it is crucial for the church to engage in conversations with the learnings of previous generations of Christians as they have sought to discern God’s intent for their time and place. All of this essential work of theologizing in community is done well in this book.

As Fensham summarizes his vision for the church in North America, it is “monastic” in its presence, pledged to being “pilgrim” in its processes, and dedicated to serving as “steward” of the well-being of the whole of God’s creation. He has a more engaged and dialogical understanding of ‘monastic’ than many of those advocating the new monasticism that we have discussed in other book notes. It involves taking vows, forming community, committing to a discipline, balancing worship and service in solidarity with the groanings of creation, and practicing radical hospitality. The ‘pilgrim’ nature of the church arises from the call of God to be on the move into God’s future, modeled in the biblical communities that acknowledged Abraham, Moses, the Prophets, Peter, and Paul as their resident theologians, provoking them to move in sync with God’s desire for justice, kindness, and humility. That desire was fully embodied in Jesus, God’s Christ. The ‘steward’ dimension, then, is the maturity into which we are being drawn by the Holy Spirit, being continually forgiven and reconciled into our dignity and worth as partners/friends with God in cultivating mutual blessing throughout all of God’s creation.

The 436 endnotes in this book (numbered sequentially for the whole book, which I really, really like!) testify to the broad range of conversations that have gone into these considerations and this vision of the church’s future. Two theologians stand out for me in this large community of reflective practitioners – D Bosch (with whom Fensham did his doctoral studies in his native South Africa) and Jurgen Moltmann. Both have shaped the ecumenical church’s discourse about its reason for being over the past 50 years in seminal ways that Fensham builds on beautifully in this book. Moltmann’s *The Church in the Power of the Future* (1977) and Bosch’s *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shift in Theology of Mission* (1991) are honoured throughout as powerful provocations for reimagining the church as a self-giving institution in God’s mission. And, more than most Canadian theologians, Fensham is in conversation with other church and social thinkers resident in Canada. To name but a few, Douglas John Hall, Harold Wells, Michael Bourgeois, Marilyn Legge, Pam McCarroll, John Vissers, Andrew Irvine, Stuart Macdonald, Jane Jacobs, Willem Venderberg, and David Lyon.

One of the most instructive themes running through the book is that of neighbourliness, focusing on with whom we are called to be neighbours (everyone, especially the poor and the suffering) and how that neighbourliness is to be lived into (welcome and respect). Fensham has introduced me to the Lithuanian-French philosopher and Talmud scholar Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas finds in the Scriptures a powerful invitation, indeed obligation, to encounter the other and the Other with an open and dialogical hospitality that leads to mutual blessing.

One of the most compelling reasons for reading this book is its astute analysis of the 'dark age' we have entered. The phrase is taken from the title of the Toronto-based urbanist, Jane Jacobs', last book. The darkness encroaches through a mania for mastery, management, measurement, and marketing. Everything, including humans, is reduced to commodities to be consumed. Our increased connectedness through technology and globalization enables more and more manipulation by those in positions of privilege. In this context, then, taking on the monastic calling of respecting and preserving the humane heritage of the race, inviting people into pilgrimage to a promised land of justice, kindness, and humility, and dealing with the stewardship of our resources by participating in the self-giving movements of the Social Trinity are all essential aspects of the church's realignment to God's mission of saving the world. But, as Fensham makes abundantly clear, this salvation is not brought about by the project of triumphalist Western progress appropriated by so many in the North American churches. A new *poiesis* is needed, a new imagining of how theory and practice are being integrated in the good news of the trinitarian God. Fensham describes it this way:

*... the music of poetry will function as an important theme throughout this book. By poetry, I mean ... the music of language and how the creative themes, beat, and energy of language can help us remember, feel, see, dance, act and believe. Even language is used here to speak of human communication that could be silent, graphic, plastic, or the expression of a human face and light in the eyes. Thus, the incarnation of Christ as Divine-human communication is poetry. Poetry is the way we grasp truth and is the way we live out of it. Poetry is the great constant of the Judeo-Christian tradition as well as all other great religious traditions in the world. The gospel comes to us as poetry.*

As is so often the case, these brief references and summaries of the major provocations of this book for me cannot capture the full richness of the conversations to be had with its author. Your faith/trust in the trinitarian God of Christians will be challenged, stretched, and reformulated through that engagement.