



The Church in Exile: Living in Hope After Christendom
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“The book seeks to address the need for the church to understand its identity, particularly in its current cultural context. In order to thrive everyone must have a clear sense of who they are, what their context is, what they are called to and how to integrate those things. This is not only true for individual health, but corporate health as well. The book tries to help the church grapple with its identity and how to live into its identity in our current cultural milieu.” —Lee Beach, on why he wrote *The Church in Exile*

“A Rich Exegetical Foray into the Old Testament and New Testament Texts”

Lee Beach has written an evocative, suggestive book that will reward careful attentiveness. His argument about the future of the church concerns a convergence of social analysis, biblical exegesis and practical theology. His social analysis outlines “the end of Christendom” and the displacement of influence and privilege for the church in the conventional Christianity of North America. Much of his data and illustrations are drawn from Canadian experience, but of course the same pertain in the United States as well.

Beach offers a rich exegetical foray into Old Testament and New Testament texts that concern the notion of “exile as displacement” as an experience in the Bible that serves as a metaphor that may illumine the loss in the contemporary church. He offers an extensive inventory of texts for Israel’s exile and then considers especially the first epistle of Peter, where the theme of the church in exile is voiced. He draws the conclusion that “the people of God are by nature exilic.”

Midway through his exegesis, however, there is a notable shift of gears that Beach does not acknowledge—a shift that is, in my judgment, altogether commendable. By consideration of the narratives of Esther, Jonah and Daniel, Beach takes up texts that are in fact from the subsequent Diaspora of Israel and not from the usual period of exile. The segue from exile to Diaspora made here is a critical one, one that many interpreters, including this commentator, are making. The difference is that the theme of “exile” leads to an expectation of a return home to normalcy. By contrast “Diaspora” is a practice of life and faith among those who are far from home, who settle in new contexts that become home, with no serious expectation of “returning home” or returning to an old normalcy. The matter is decisive for getting on with ministry. “Exile” might be a hope of “recovery” for the way the church used to be, whereas “Diaspora” is a recognition that there will not be any return home and there will not be a recovery of any old normalcy.

Diaspora as distinct from exile requires finding a new way for theology, church and ministry. The matter is put succinctly by Beach: “[This] leadership will seek to help engender hope in the life of a congregation by cultivating an imagination within them that fuels a missional vision for its future existence.”

The key terms are *hope, imagination* and *missional vision*.

The book, then, is an extended and bold articulation of practical theology that considers what is now required and permitted for a church that is not “going home.” Much of Beach’s reflection concerns the holiness of the church. In exile Israel had to focus on being “a holy

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people to the Lord,” which led to the punctilious provisions of Leviticus. And then the church, in the Epistles, is to be a holy people amid the Roman Empire:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Once you were not a people,
but now you are God’s people,
once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy. (1 Pet 2:9-10 NRSV)

Beach shrewdly sees that a different kind of holiness is urgent and is required in context. He shakes off an older essentialist notion of holiness that had its settled habits. It must now be, rather, a relational, narrative holiness that issues in bold nonconformity. And surely it is the case, that to be gospel-free the urgency of nonconformity has always been crucial for the church as it has shaken off the assurances and expectations of establishment society.

As a card-carrying “progressive” Christian, I have often reflected of late on the fact that many evangelical Christians (by no means all!), including Beach, seem more ready to engage the new, disordered openness of the postmodern context of the church with more energy and expectation than are some fatigued progressives. And when I ask why that is the case, what becomes clear is that there is the well-grounded hope that is rooted in God’s own fidelity that is the warrant for fresh initiatives. It is that good hope that makes Beach’s argument serious and makes it need to be taken seriously.

More than once his argument returns to the narrative in Acts 10–11. That narrative reports on the way in which Peter is led by the Spirit to new notions of holiness that move past old precisions about purity and cleanness. This new holiness, as Beach views it, is highly contextual, a learning that was most demanding for Peter. His new context in the presence of Gentiles determined that Peter must be adventuresome in his faith and apostolic calling. What is required and permitted for God’s holy people is largely determined by context. This kind of Spirit-led faith invites the church to go where it has never been and has never thought to go. The new context for the church is in the midst of radical otherness, as radical as the Gentiles were to Jewish Christians in the first century. Beach’s assessment is surely correct. His book invites church leaders to recognize where God has now put the church. The work of new leadership – in terms of hope, imagination and missional vision – is to be about the business of “defining reality” in ways that violate, subvert and transgress all old definitions of reality. Specifically this means to contradict the dominant definitions of reality that oppose gospel truth. Such leaders will anticipate that such new definitions of reality will be vigorously contested, outside the congregation and within it. Anything less than that work will end in irrelevance and despair. This book is a rich exercise in hope!

– Foreword by Walter Brueggemann, Columbia Theological Seminary