

11-25-2011

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Recommended Citation

Jacobsen, David Schnasa (2011) "Emerging from the Dark Age Ahead: The Future of the North American Church," *Consensus*: Vol. 33 : Iss. 2 , Article 18.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol33/iss2/18>

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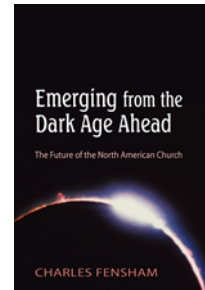
Book Review

Emerging from the Dark Age Ahead: The Future of the North American Church

Charles Fensham

Ottawa: Novalis, 2008

Charles Fensham paints a dark picture of the context and reality of the North American Church. He takes seriously its present and future as a disestablished body. He looks squarely at the ways in which it is itself subject to realities that distort its life, especially the cultural forces of mastery, technique, and digitization. But through it all he holds to a vision that he argues can sustain the church in its dark future going forward. He seeks to bring the church to a greater awareness of the church's missional situation understood within the Trinitarian life of God. While it ranges across cultural trends and emerging realities with great sweep and insight, it does so not merely to catalogue them, but to invite us deeper. His work is well worth the time and effort to read.



The titular phrase “Dark Age Ahead” comes from the title of Canadian urbanist Jane Jacobs’ final book. The metaphoric frame that Jacobs’ title provides is important for Fensham’s work. It speaks to our loss of knowledge, wisdom, memory, and meaning – the very things that make it possible for us to engage for the common good. In light of this reality, Fensham invites us to think carefully and theologically about how a missional church may find its way forward. The journey begins with the retrieval of a missional hermeneutic of scripture. Here Fensham draws from the work of his mentor, David Bosch. The analysis of the cultural forces of mastery and technique take up the middle portion of the book. Fensham’s reflection on how this impacts the media and our contemporary digitized consciousness is an unusually insightful section. The final part of the book comprises his most thoroughgoing theological work. Linking a missional theology to the life of the social Trinity, he foregrounds a more relational vision of the church and the church’s life going forward. He also retrieves elements of monasticism as a way of envisioning how the church might enact and embody this relational vision. He sees ecclesial life beyond the lures of technique and mastery even if we must view it in “a rear view mirror.”

The book is not always an easy read. On occasion, there are diversions that pull us away from the otherwise stunning pilgrim journey he offers – the apology for Bosch’s work in chapter 1, for example, does not always seem germane to his own main argument. There are also, at points, further questions to be asked. Fensham does not seem to sense any irony in the rejection of technique and mastery in this digitized age. Weber’s thesis that the rise of instrumental reason happened precisely in a post-Reformation Calvinist context in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* would seem to indicate that our

relationship to the themes of technique and mastery comes closer to our most deeply held ecclesial traditions than we'd like to admit. This is underlined all the more by the suggestion that we return to the monastic in particular. A discussion of this irony might have enhanced the book even further.

Still, the work is important for anyone reflecting on the life of the church in the Canadian context. As disestablished entities, our churches need to rethink our relationship to our scriptures, traditions, and the world in which we live. Fensham is a both a helpful guide and a worthy companion for the pilgrimage into the dark age ahead.

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