



Review

Fieldwork in Theology: Exploring the Social Context of God's Work in the World

Christian Scharen

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With an awareness of the emergence of postmodernity and its challenge for the contemporary church, a group of scholars formed the network of The Church and Postmodern Culture (CPC). In collaboration with Baker Academic, CPC produces a series that now has nine titles to foster understanding the faith and practice of the church and its response to postmodernity. The present title is written by Christian Scharen, “one of today’s finest practical theologians,” currently working as vice president of applied research at Auburn Theologi-



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cal Seminary in New York City. The goal of this book is the author's interaction with scholars and sociologists and to analyze their thoughts.

The author divided the book into five parts. Part one calls for the wake-up of Christians in response to the challenge of postmodern world. The author proposed fieldwork in theology as the tool of the church's response to the world. As a practical theologian, he stresses the need of connecting theology and ethics and faith and work. He chose Bourdieu to be his main interlocutor because he was a paradoxical thinker whose goal was to relate academic theology and practical theology by means of fieldwork. Part two deals with a self-reflection and re-definition of sin. Together with Gaston Bachelard, whose method he tried to criticize one's withdrawal from the world, the author re-defined sin not only as pride of cultural imperialism, but also as escape from the world God loves.

Part three picks up Maurice Merleau's influential phenomenon of "Embodied Perception" as a point of departure for understanding what it means to be incarnational church in a postmodern world. The incarnational church, according to the author, means "being in and with the world." What we learn from this part especially is the way the author criticizes Rene Descartes' philosophy of "I think, therefore I am," which disconnects mind from body, individuals from communals (knowing the self through the self). Arguing against such ideology of disembodiment and individualism, the author argued that mind and body should be interrelated for action. He even proposed to see the church as the embodied and communal body of Christ. This implies the idea that God created us to be relational to others ("we know the self only in relation to others:" Barth).

Part four examines the connection between Bourdieu's sociology of practice and British theologian Rowan William's theology that claims that theology must begin with the concrete life rather than with the abstract place. In other words, the meaning and mission of God is to be discovered in the human

world. This means that our daily experience and understanding of God must necessarily be expressed through the human cultures of metaphors. God's goal of justice and peace has to be actualized in a wider human society, not just in the church. Related to this vocational sense, part five re-considers the church as being for others. Being for others echoes Jesus' words; "I came not to be served, but to serve others," (Mk. 10:45). Serving for others is not general, but particular. This is because the incarnate Christ comes not as humanity in general, but comes as one marginalized (Phil. 2:7-8) from the center and communities of the power.

Thus, the particular groups we are called to serve are the marginalized regardless of religiosities and ethnicities. But this does not mean that we confine Christ's salvation to the particular people. The point is this: Christ saved everyone from the power of sin, but He served and advocated for the particular groups who are oppressed by the powerful. Oppression of one over the other is sin. This means when we advocate for the marginalized, we expose sin of oppressors and speak truth to the latter.

In sum, the strength of this book is multi-dimensional. First, the author's argument is through and through Christocentric. A Christocentric sense of incarnation and embodiment is theologically demonstrated. The idea that God became flesh and dwells in all humanity (Jn. 1:14) is the basis for doing contextual theology in any context. Jesus is the contextual person. He contextualized His divinity by becoming human. The idea of Christ's being divine and becoming human is crucial. This means that Jesus does not simply proclaim God's kingdom in a human world, but He embodies it by revealing the character of God's self-giving love and liberating justice. Thus, the task of church is not only to bear the gospel of God's love and justice, but to embody it.

Second, building on the incarnation of Christ, the author stressed that theology must begin with the "concrete human life by means of fieldwork not with the Trinity" by means of

speculation.” I agree with him that theology must begin with human world, as theology does not drop from heaven. Theology means a human reflection on how we experience God’s work in our daily lives of religious symbols and practices from below. Yet, the way we experience God and reflect on His work may be different from one another depending on the context. While a symbolic expression of God as rice in terms of daily nourishment is meaningful for Asians, it is meaningless for Westerners. For the latter, God is bread. Thus, postmodernity stresses that there is no absolute truth. This demands a mutual respect and intercultural exchange of insights for a higher truth. Third, a Christocentric church means “being in and for the postmodern world.” The idea of “being in the world” signifies the identity of the church as a liturgical community, whereas “being for the world,” means the vocation of the church not only for herself in an exclusive manner, but also for the wider world God lives and loves. As a community placed in the world, our relation to the world is imperative. Our relation to the world does not mean that we are to be conformed to the secular norm of the world (Rom. 12:2). We are called to be the church in and for the world, but not of the world. Our task is, thus, to be the practical agents of transforming the world. In short, this excellent book provides a theological and empirical framework for those who want to discern how God is at work in the world as His creation through all humans as His image.