

Review

Paul S. Williams, 2020. *Exiles On Mission: How Christians Can Thrive in a Post-Christian World*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press. ISBN: 9781587434358.

By Brian Rapske, PhD

Paul S. Williams has written *Exiles On Mission* out of a thoughtful personal pilgrimage. After fifteen years as a professional economist and researcher for an international real estate consulting and investment banking group based in London, England, he joined the faculty of Regent College in Vancouver, Canada. There he was part of the launch of the Marketplace Institute. He continues to serve as Research Professor of Marketplace Theology and Leadership. As Williams describes his journey in transition, “The emphasis of my questions changed from ‘How do I relate my faith to my work?’ to ‘How does the church engage missionally in contemporary culture?’” (xii) He is executive producer of ReFrame, an innovative video curriculum series. The content of the present volume is the theological basis of that series.

Christians have not found the help they need from the church or the Christian academy in bridging the faith-life and sacred-secular divides as Western culture has moved through a progressive and piecemeal declension from Christianity and world influence. Williams admits the crisis, but stands confident, calling the church “to face realities and seek God together for faith to respond in our generation with the same striking countercultural combination of humility, boldness, and expectation of the manifestation of God’s presence that characterized early Christianity and other periods of renewal and vitality.” (xv) Admitting the paradox that “though we *long* for the kingdom, we are often *ashamed* of the gospel” (xv), Williams sets himself to plot a course by which Christians, as exiles on mission, can thrive in a post-Christian world.

The 12 chapters of the book are laid out in three parts. Part 1, titled “Enduring Faith: Christians and the Contemporary World,” begins in the first of its four chapters with a brief historical sketch of the compromises and losses of the church through the end of Christendom, the rise of modernity and the devastation of world war. Williams canvasses the earlier prophetic, evangelistic and pastoral reforming efforts and more recent missional attempts at retrenchment, ecclesial mission, and ‘lay’ ministry. Following chapters consider what it means to be God’s people in exile, resisting the two temptations of assimilation and withdrawal, and how alienage can be both a judgment and a mission. Herein lies a challenge to faith,

leading Williams to ask what the church will believe and to whom it will listen going forward.

Part 2, “Fostering Hope: From Alien to Ambassador,” demonstrates in its four chapters the close connection between Christian identity, self-understanding and mission. Christians must learn honestly to lament the trouble of exile, Williams argues, informed by the context of God’s intent and actions. In the meantime, they must keep a fix on their real identity in Christ and answer their ambassadorial calling and mission. He asserts, “Our condition of exile turns out to be the basis for mission, not an obstacle to it.” (134) Therein lies hope.

The four chapters of Part 3, titled “Ambassadors of Love: Exiles On Mission,” consider contemporary cultures and how to address them missionally. Williams reflects upon what it means for ambassadors to ‘learn the language’ of a culture. One way to read cultural stories is to ask probing questions and listen carefully to the answers that disclose “the basic assumptions that constitute a given worldview.” (139) He cites the worldview analysis of James Sire’s *The Universe Next Door* as a particularly compelling way of probing for beliefs and knowledge. (140-44). Given that “actions both develop and reveal character traits” (140), whether virtues or vices, another way to learn the language is to observe cultural practices to discern their underlying motivations. Assumptions about things connect with intentions and goals. Actions are the expression of attempts to achieve those goals given the assumptions and are formative of character. Williams commends the work of Alasdair MacIntyre (*After Virtue*) and James K.A. Smith (*Desiring the Kingdom*) as particularly helpful in disclosing how we shape stories and how stories shape us.

The five cultural stories of the West (part of a larger number) that Williams identifies in the next chapter can, one and all, be engaged and decoded using the six dramatic acts of the biblical story (Creation, Fall, Israel, Jesus, Church, New Creation) because it is “God’s story that encompasses every person—indeed, everything—at all times and all places” (154). He provides a “cultural language primer” (156) on each story, listening for what it affirms and denies regarding the six dramatic acts and the hopes and the fears that each discloses. Williams helpfully nuances his analysis when he observes that some of the five cultural stories overlap and are mutually reinforcing while others are at serious odds with one another, and that communities and subcultures often embrace them in a mix. The object in the analysis is to discover the fixed points and flexibilities—“seeing how the structure of the biblical story can help us understand them and identify what we can affirm as well as what we need to deny.” (180f.) This is a task of ambassadorial mission.

The penultimate chapter describes Christian mission as ‘cultural translation’—“how we communicate the meaning of the gospel in a culture that has lost sight of that meaning and may routinely misunderstand the gospel because of a latent but fading cultural memory.” (185) Translation has saving potential if it is rooted in what

Williams calls the fundamental translation effected by God in Christ. It is transformative when read and translatable when performed by spirit-guided human translators with sensitivity to its genres, he explains. The final chapter calls for the reader, earlier invited to explore the metaphors of exile and ambassador, to think of what it means to be a pilgrim as a way of being. Finding resonances in Scripture with the work of Victor Turner, Williams affirms that Christian pilgrims who are individually and collectively living ‘on *the Way*’ will be creative and fruitful in the ambiguity of between-ness (*liminality*) and there establish and nurture a leveling new identity as family (*communitas*) in the corporate journey on mission.

Exiles on Mission is a well thought out and carefully crafted piece of writing that addresses at some depth a critically important issue—whether we and the church will allow ourselves to blend into the culture or “seek the welfare of the city” (Jer. 29:7) as ambassadors of hope in the new Babylon.

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