Pascal D. Bazzell


Pascal Bazzell’s lively, wide-ranging book centres on (what he terms) a Filipino Ecclesial Community facing Homelessness (FECH). This ethnographic study of individuals and families (including babies, children and elderly people) living in a city park, some for several decades, is based on research conducted between 2003 and 2012, and the book is a version of Bazzell’s PhD thesis. He worked with OMF (Overseas Missionary Fellowship) in the Philippines, and, for part of this time, was minister to this community. He concludes that the FECH’s ecclesiology is distinctive and its own entity, not formed in reaction to or rejection of ‘mainstream’ ecclesiologies, though he also owns that the park-dwellers would not necessarily recognize themselves as ecclesiologists (see below).

Bazzell aims to bridge a gap between classic systematic ecclesiologies and those rooted in congregational studies. He seeks to develop a paradigm for working with homeless people which is ecclesially-oriented, rather than grounded in tropes of rescue, service or advocacy, or which objectifies and removes homeless people’s agency. However, although the book contains some moments of self-reflexivity on his part, there is very little discussion of the tensions of conducting research in a community where one holds a position of power.

Too many theological treatments of homelessness seize on it as a useful metaphor for spiritual nomadism with scant attention to the actual experiences of homeless people, but Bazzell’s book is clearly rooted in the park-dwellers’ lives. Some had come to the park after abusive relationships, unemployment or breakdowns, and found greater community and camaraderie there than in ‘settled’ society. Some children attended school nearby and their parents were reluctant to withdraw them by moving away, though the challenges of chronically interrupted sleep, poor diet, and the lack of electric light in the evening or an appropriate place to do homework meant that many pupils dropped out by mid-year and received only a partial education. Whilst the Philippines’ hot climate made living outside year-round possible, it also left the park-dwellers vulnerable to losing their possessions to tropical rainstorms. Bazzell describes the streetwise childhoods of the park children, finding their own food, sleeping outside alone and crossing busy roads alone as toddlers, and often becoming parents themselves in their mid-teens. Whilst this lifestyle breeds resourcefulness and resilience, he remarks, some children are living with lifelong consequences of having received inadequate healthcare early on.
The book is clearly rooted in Christian traditions, engaging with (for example) local, Asian, contextual, urban and post-colonial theological literatures, mainly Roman Catholic or evangelical Protestant. However, the book’s extensive nature sometimes makes it feel rather unwieldy, and, although individual topics are usually well-handled, it is not always clear why one section follows another or whether Bazzell needs all of them to make his case. That said, I particularly valued the reading of Mark’s gospel. This draws out the ambivalent nature of concepts such as kinship (it is all very well for those who are well-connected to relativize the concept of family, as Mark’s Jesus seems to do, but when you are homeless and desperate to keep your family together at all costs, it is not so easy to jettison); the context-specific nature of scholarly interpretative preoccupations (many readers, notes Bazzell, find Jesus’ initially apparently dismissive approach to the Syro-Phoenician woman distressing and even racist – but the park-dwellers, who are well used to being dismissed and insulted, do not get hung up on it); and well-worn concepts such as comparisons between the honour-shame paradigm in first-century Palestinian culture and cognate phenomena today. However, the final hermeneutical word, despite drawing on the park-dwellers’ perspectives, seems to rest with Bazzell, whose comments sometimes betray a moralizing tone (‘My wife and I ... feel overwhelmed and deeply frustrated by the reality of their environment and the wicked choices made in response to it. How could they not care about their children’s education? Why do they put so many hindrances in their way? Why is that elder always falling back into alcoholism?’ [p. 154]). Bazzell notes that his research questions were ‘geared towards the text (the historical setting)’ (p. 124) with the themes identified as significant by the fech a secondary focus. This ostensibly sets the fech readers alongside the scholarly conversation without disproportionately privileging their interpretations, but in practice it may diminish the weight of their insights by framing them within a context which has pre-determined which responses fit the texts.

Bazzell concludes that a major focus of Mark’s gospel is ‘the family as an ecclesial metaphor of the community of those who do God’s will’ (p. 144). This underpins Bazzell’s main constructive theological chapter, ‘Towards a Familia Dei Ecclesiology’. He acknowledges that this is an external description of the fech’s life in ecclesial terms; the park-dwellers have not themselves attempted to set out a distinctive ecclesiology. Bazzell’s use of the term familia Dei interchangeably to refer to biological family or to the worldwide Church may muddy the waters, especially since the park-dwellers were less willing than Bazzell might have wished to relativize the significance of biological kin. It is not always clear whether Bazzell endorses mainstream Roman Catholic accounts of the (biological) family as primary unit of society and locus of the