
Book Review

Gary W. Fick, *Food, Farming, and Faith* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008), 223 pp., \$14.95 (pbk), ISBN: 978-0-7914-7384-9.

Gary Fick, an extension agent and agronomist, has a holistic understanding of agriculture that includes not only ecological relationships (soil, water, air, plants, animals) but also social relationships (especially between farmers and consumers and between present and future generations) and spiritual/ethical relationships (based on his understanding of God's will according to his interpretation of the Christian Bible) (p. 169). This understanding informs his discussion of food production, including chapter topics that one would expect to find in a book written by an agronomist—for example, 'Soil and Water' and 'Livestock and Agriculture'. Fick explicitly states that his 'book is about food, farming, and faith, integrating those topics in nontechnical language for the nonspecialist' (p. xvi). Overall, he understands his special contribution in this book, however, as his interpretation of what 'farming by the Book' (p. xv)—that is, farming by biblical principles—requires of Christians.

Fick is well aware of the difficulty of engaging in interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary work (p. 116), and as is typical for those who engage in this work, individual strengths are generally in one's home discipline. As an agronomist at a land-grant university, Fick's strengths are in his discussion of the typical agricultural topics related to soil, water, seeds, and livestock. As an organic farmer I often found myself agreeing with his wisdom concerning ecological problems relating to conventional farming methods, and the promise of alternative practices. I found his list of 15 essentials of agriculture (see especially Appendix 3) an enlightening condensation of wisdom gained from his life in agriculture, as well as an expression of his Christian faith. Certainly, if food production systems were based on these principles, the world would be a much healthier place, physically, socially, and spiritually. However, I suspect that some of his readers will also conclude that his list of essentials can easily be constructed without reference to the biblical text.

As is also typical for those of us who engage in multidisciplinary research, the area in which we are most vulnerable to criticism is the area in which we are stretching the furthest. Fick's approach to biblical interpretation is naïve and does not draw sufficiently from current scholarly discussions of the Bible. Fick himself seems to anticipate this criticism when he notes that 'scholarly correct interpretations are possible' (p. xviii), but he distances himself from that task. That might be acceptable for a person of faith not trained in the biblical languages and modern exegetical methods; however, when one's project is to describe what 'farming by the Book' is, one should engage more deeply in the discipline of the academic study of the Bible.

Fick's approach is an accumulation of proof texts from the Bible to support the principles he has learned in the study of agricultural sustainability. Although I often

agree with his conclusions, his interpretive method itself is problematic, as illustrated in his discussion of women in the Bible. When he discusses 'the feminization of poverty' (p. 130), he briefly notes that some have tried to justify the oppression of women with biblical passages, but quickly concludes that they 'lack biblical grounding' (p. 145). Here he would have profited from familiarity with the wealth of discussion about the patriarchy inherent in the biblical text, including the ways in which feminists have sought to overcome this problem, including deciding to ignore the strong patriarchal themes as oppressive ones that simply must be abandoned, while seeking to retrieve the suppressed voices of women in the biblical text.

More recently, some biblical scholars have adapted a similar approach to scripture for ecological hermeneutics, demonstrating the anthropocentric nature of some biblical texts while seeking to retrieve the suppressed voices of the non-human members of the Earth community (see Habel and Trudinger 2008 for a review of the literature). If Fick were more familiar with this literature, he might not have uncritically accepted the often anthropocentric perspective of the biblical text itself. Fick clearly wants to defend the Bible against its critics (including Lynn White, Jr., p. 19) but he too quickly dismisses their arguments and then simply presents his opposing perspective. He asserts that 'passages of the Bible should not be explained in isolation but in harmony with all biblical teachings taken together' (p. 32). He seems to naively assume that the biblical text speaks with one voice. Because of the diversity found within the biblical tradition, however, such harmonization is impossible. What is necessary is a hermeneutical principle that may have biblical analogues, and that may be used to provide an overall interpretive method for approaching a problem. For example, Fick overlooks some of his Christian opponents such as those who would argue on the basis of their interpretation of apocalyptic passages (especially in Revelation) that global warming and the resulting ecological devastation is actually God's judgment of the earth. They would likely argue that they have the correct harmonization of all the biblical teachings in contrast to Fick. Familiarity with recent discussions in ecological hermeneutics would have helped Fick anticipate such arguments by correcting his own naïve approach to the biblical text and asserting more clearly an ecological approach.

Another unfortunate result of his unfamiliarity with recent work in ecological hermeneutics is his own anthropocentric perspective based on his reading of various biblical passages. For example, Fick writes,

Wild and domesticated species are valued by God and serve and praise him by their natural lives. At the same time, people are more valuable to him, and if a choice must be made, people have priority (p. 41).

Fick also operates out of the type of Western dualism that often underlies the acceptance of some necessary ecological destruction—for example, physical/material/earth versus spiritual/heaven (p. 59). Admittedly, any discussion of the production of food for humans is likely to be anthropocentric to some extent, but Fick's anthropocentrism and dualism actually undercuts what could be a much stronger statement of his 15 essentials from a different perspective (for example, a biocentric one). As such, he actually provides yet another example of how the anthropocentrism of many biblical passages can undermine ecological discussions by establishing an anthropocentric hierarchy of natural value.

As a biblical scholar, I am critical of Fick's method of biblical interpretation. As a Christian, however, I find him an excellent conversation partner about food, farming, and faith, because we agree that our current food production system is unhealthy and unsustainable.

Reference

Habel, Norman C., and Peter Trudinger. 2008. *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature).

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