

BOOK REVIEW

Leith, Jenny. 2023. *Political Formation: Being Formed by the Spirit in Church and World*

London: SCM Press.
ISBN: 9780334063032

Reviewed by Bernhard Schröder

Where and how do we learn to live as disciples in a post-Christendom era? Jenny Leith tackles this question in her book *Political Formation*. It is based on her doctoral thesis at Durham University.

What sets this book apart is the author's unique background and experiences outside of academia. Before pursuing her doctoral studies, she worked in politics as a parliamentary researcher and then in social policy. These engagements have undoubtedly influenced her approach to theological discourse, and this influence is evident throughout the pages of the book. She describes her work as a case study within the Church of England which has specific challenges such as a multicultural society and a colonial history. However, she is convinced that her theory of formation has high relevance when applied in another context (3).

The main thesis challenges the traditional view that Christian formation primarily occurs within the church, with the expectation of then applying Christian ethics in civil life. Leith questions this view due to two significant factors. First, she highlights the church's extensive guilt, she names issues such as sexual abuse and white supremacy. Leith doubts whether the church can still provide a reliable ethical purpose after moral failings (1). Second, she contends that being a disciple often involves navigating the complexities of everyday choices. It is rather a "struggle for integrity amid uncertainty and limited time" (2) than an opportunity for a dramatic act of clear witness to Christ. Therefore, Leith's thesis proposes that Christians are formed by the Spirit both within the church and in the world. She defines formation as the process of being shaped for virtuous action with the ultimate goal of flourishing (7).

The book follows a thoughtful structure as indicated by its subtitle *Being Formed by the Spirit in Church and World*. The initial focus lies on formation through one's connection to and participation in the church, which is explored in the first two chapters.

Leith refers to the works of Sam Wells and Graham Ward, who see prayer and the Eucharist (23) as the main places for formation. According to them, being formed in church often means a "counter-formation" (25). Christians provide virtues and actions needed by the world, which is seen as a deficit place. Leith criticizes this view. Rather, she argues, being formed in the world brings innovation (31). The church can't offer all resources needed for formation in itself. She asks: "Can we properly form love for God and for those around us with the established practises?" (50) Her answer is no, because "we require the perspective of others to know ourselves" (52) – and to be formed.

As a result, she poses the question of what a church that enables formation by the Spirit would look like, which she addresses in chapters 3–5. Here she proposes three "twin callings": The church is at the same time a) *oikos* (household) and *polis* (a political community), b) confident and humble, c) gathering and scattering. With the help of these dynamics, she proposes that "the church is called into being by God *and* the church remains unfinished and incomplete." (73) These callings form the church to dwell in the current complexity (83). In chapter 4 she describes the failures of the church in executing power such as white supremacy and class-based hierarchy (89). She names the role of Anglican theology in the context of colonialism and slavery (96–9) and the clericalism within the church (94). "The church's tendency to under-recognise the presence of sin in its life is not, therefore an accidental feature of ecclesial polity: rather we will never be fully aware of how *unaware* we are of sin." (101)

She offers a "spirit-led ecclesiology" (87), which recognizes the own malformation and is clear about the fact that God is at work at the same time.

Leith is convinced that each member of the church is a unique gift to church and world. In chapter 5 she looks at the formation of the church through each member. She adopts Jenny Dagers' term "troubling gifts" (117). According to Leith, "being brought into recognition of sinfulness is itself a gift" of the Holy Spirit. Through recognition of sin, lament and reconciliation the church can be shaped by the Spirit (124). Looking at the work of the Spirit with the people at the margins of society means gathering the scattered experiences of its member as gifts (125) forming the church. "Ecclesial inclusiveness is thus not pursued for its own sake, but out of the conviction that the life of the church depends on the participation of every member" (131).

In the third part of the book, chapters 6–7, she examines formation by the Spirit in the context of the world, particularly through political engagement. In chapter 6 she offers insights and examples of how an engagement in political structures offers formation as a disciple of Christ. In politics, one encounters the stranger, and politics is thus a field to learn how to love your enemy (161).

In chapter 7 Leith refers to Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* and the teaching of Mandates. She outlines the necessity of a Christian disciple to "let go of certain forms of personal sovereignty" (176) because of the uncertainty of political action. However, exactly this place of personal loss is the place of the beginning of life as a person whose identity rests in God. By this, a Christian is set free to political action with responsibility (177).

In a concluding chapter, Leith applies her view of the formation of individuals to the formation of society on a national level. She looks at the field of civic identity and national polity and how the church can play a role here (190).

The book is well structured. Questions and summaries guide the reader in the progress and foster their reflection. The book is very accessible, providing an extensive index of names and subjects, facilitating further exploration of the material.

Leith introduces a new paradigm for understanding the interaction between the church and the world. This is neither the "Benedict Option" (Rod Dreher), a withdrawal from the world into a parallel universe nor a simplistic public theology to regain political power once possessed.

Furthermore, it offers valuable insights and ideas for fostering a church that is open to the transformative work of the Spirit.

Nevertheless, a weakness for me is the lack of substantial engagement with biblical topics, particularly in the chapters addressing sin and reconciliation. According to scripture and confession the Spirit has promised to be found in the context of the Bible, prayer and ecclesial community. In *Ecclesial Futures Vol. 3,2*, Mike Harrison proposes a link with neuroscience to formation within the church, which seems to fill these gaps.

In conclusion, *Political Formation: Being Formed by the Spirit in Church and World* is an important contribution to the discussion about Christian formation in a post-Christendom era. The book challenges traditional notions of formation and offers a paradigm shift in understanding the interaction between the church and the world.

A church open to the work of the Spirit in unexpected ways is envisioned and it invites work on this vision.

About the author

Bernhard Schröder, Practical Theologian, Institute for the Research on Mission and Church, Austria.

bernhard.schroeder@i-m-k.org