

Collins, Paul M. and Barry Ensign-George. Eds. *Denomination: Assessing an Ecclesiological Category*. Ecclesiological Investigations Vol. 11. (London, UK: T&T Clark International, 2011). x + 177 pp. \$94.50 hardback.

The essays comprising this fascinating volume grant readers an ecumenically diverse, multi-perspectival, and thus fairly thorough understanding of the term, “denomination.” They do so in ways that keep the book as relevant today as when first published in 2011. Following co-editor Paul Collins’ helpful Introduction, the 11 chapters are papers presented in a session of the Ecclesiological Investigations Group at the 2008 meeting for the American Academy of Religion. Principal to that meeting and this collection is co-editor Barry Ensign-George’s opening essay, “Denomination as Ecclesiological Category: Sketching an Assessment.” The other essays thus function as responses, representing on one hand diverse Christian traditions and on the other, clarifying our critical concerns. Hence as the book title suggests, “assessing” the notion of denomination as an “ecclesiological category.” Respondents represent Pentecostal, Quaker, Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Anglican, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox traditions. Hence, the essays altogether read as a lively yet mutually-informing conversation with Ensign-George’s paper.

Central to Ensign-George’s argument for using the category of “denomination” as a viable way of describing diverse Christian church traditions—at least within Protestantism—is his insistence that the term is historically rooted in “theological” rather than (as opponents often argue) “sociological” reflection (1-2, 17 n. 1). He essentially substantiates this argument through two intrinsic themes he ascribes to the term. First, he argues that the term aptly describes a phenomenon intrinsic to linking the broadness of the Christian Church (as the Nicene Creed states: “one, holy, catholic, apostolic”) and its many localised concrete expressions; hence, local congregations. This phenomenon Ensign-George conceptualises as “intermediary structure” (4-7), which he posits as a synonym for “denomination” (5). He then correlates this concept to his second ascribed theme, namely, the biblical portrayal of embodied “diversity” as God’s aim for humanity and creation within a Christian vision of creational flourishing (7-16).

The most critical appraisal of Ensign-George’s study is Anglican Paul Avis’ essay. In my opinion, he rightly acknowledges warrant for the plethora of diverse Christian groups comprising Protestantism, while forcefully arguing that the term “denomination” is neither a “biblical word or idea, nor is it a theological or ecclesiological term” (22). He

then argues how other terms can better theologically articulate this diversity, such as “Christian tradition” (22).

Meanwhile, Pentecostal theologian Wolfgang Vondey’s essay (“The Denomination in Classical and Global Pentecostal Ecclesiology: A Historical and Theological Contribution”) especially provides Pentecostal readers an erudite discussion on how earlier 20th century classical Pentecostalism (particularly looking at the North American/USA narrative) has theologically wrestled with the “denomination” term. Through engaging earlier literature, he skilfully explains how early Pentecostals generally eschewed the term, strongly preferring to self-identity themselves through the term, “movement” (100-105). Meanwhile, he also sketches how practical organisational challenges eventually forced Pentecostal groups to embrace denominationally descriptive structures (105-108). Yet more pointedly, he also explains how historically up to this present day, Classical Pentecostalism has yet to construct from within its own resources a “comprehensive systematic . . . Pentecostal ecclesiology.” He explicitly forwards his essay as a suggested cure towards this aim (101, 109-111).

Vondey therefore argues that a constructive Pentecostal ecclesiology should deeply mine the tradition’s earlier penchant towards “movement” language, which he effectively links to the eschatological fervour and “liminal” aims of Pentecostal spirituality (110). I am aware that Vondey has consistently expressed similar themes elsewhere. Yet the unique quality of this essay lies in how he ecumenically forwards these distinctive Pentecostal themes towards this broader Christian conversation; particularly how Pentecostalism robustly nuances the “eschatological and dynamic character of Christianity” (167).

Another essay that especially caught my attention is Roman Catholic Peter de May’s reflection. While dismissing any appropriateness of the “denomination” term with reference to his church tradition, he argues how the term helps us appreciate the unique communal giftedness of different Protestant churches (151), in ways that signify a historically warranted, “contingent” local “embodiment” of Christian life (158-159).

Meanwhile, Ensign-George’s work along with fellow Presbyterian Amy Plantinga Pauw’s essay (“Presbyterianism and Denomination”) and Kirsteen Kim’s closing paper (“Afterward: Denomination in Global Perspective”) demonstrates that the historical roots and most contemporary aptness with denominationalism actually lies with the Presbyterian tradition, and hence with the greater Reformed family of Protestantism (133-135, 165-166). So, if we can embrace the legitimacy of the “denominational” structures that comprise Protestantism, we can

thus appreciate this as perhaps a unique gift that the Reformed tradition offers the greater Christian tradition.

To clarify, I would point out how Pauw squarely acknowledges that denominations signify a “provisional structure of Christian existence that has taken diverse forms across space and time” (145). Yet for this reason, these structures provide repositories of unique “traditions,” each of which can ecumenically share with others (144). As Kim points out, when we recognise the “contingent” and “provisional” nature of different Christian structures, including our own, denominationalism thus fosters a healthy “‘receptive’ form of ecumenism” (172), referring to mutual exchange of the communal gifts each tradition uniquely comprises. Hence, as Kim suggests—and which I will more strongly stress here—it is this very concept of distinctive yet *limited perspectival* giftedness that all Christian traditions enjoy, that denominationalism theologically proffers to ecclesiology that is, to a theology of the Church (172).

Let me conclude by outlining, specifically for a Pentecostal readership and within Pentecostal studies, this volume’s relevancy, limitations and strengths. Coming from an Assemblies of God background, I know from personal experience, as Vondey well stresses, that we Pentecostals generally find ourselves ambivalent towards describing our corporate identity through the category of “denomination.” I would agree with Vondey that we have good reasons for this, rooted in our unique spirituality. I moreover concur with Avis that other terms may be more theologically suitable for defining the Spirit-birther pluralism, such as the words “traditions” or “spiritualities.” Nonetheless, as a number of the respondents point out, the denomination category has historically proven helpful towards comprehending Protestant plurality. We recognise how on one hand the term helps us conceptualise the “contingent” institutional structures requisite for a tradition’s missiological effectiveness within specific contexts, and on the other how the term is simply a “model” for describing Spirit-birther ecclesial diversity.

One limitation to this collection is that it lacks adequate analysis on how the denomination concept emerged within the 17th to 18th century Euro/American emergence of Protestant Evangelicalism as a movement sometimes within and sometimes counter to the historic Protestant “national” churches. The reader should therefore appreciate the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox represented essays as *etic* responses to a primarily Protestant phenomenon while Protestant essays thus provide an *emic* perspective.

In summary, let me reiterate that—while moreover recalling how the volume also positively engages a Pentecostal response within its conversation—I would strongly recommend this volume as an

imperative college library resource, from which both undergraduate and graduate students can retrieve for assigned readings or research. The volume specifically falls within the areas of ecclesiology, ecumenicalism, and Protestant tradition. Second, this well written edition provides readers a valuable assist for anyone desiring or needing to better comprehend the “denomination” concept—either for better understanding how the notion plays out within one’s own ecclesial setting, or within contemporary ecumenical dialogue.

Reviewed by Monte Lee Rice