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Book Review: Early Christian Mission

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about his views. He has been active not only in scholarly guilds but also in the church and church-related institutions for so long that he has established a univocal stance toward his topic: fair to the complexity of the subject matter as seen in biblical scholarship, yet faithful to the contents of the subject matter as confessed by Christians. In this, the book is a model not only of historical-exegetical judgment and theological reflection but also of gospel witness. Marshall’s aim seems to be for (student) readers to be encouraged in the direction of Christian faith rather than confused or put off by it.

A fourth virtue is sensibleness. Again and again, Marshall alludes to established views and then rejects them on what he feels are compelling grounds. Again and again, I find Marshall to have staked out a position more reasonable than the ones he rejects. James and Paul are not in fundamental disagreement on the matter of faith and works (pp. 692–93). The “cup of cold water” portion of the account of the sheep and the goats (Matt 25:31–46) does not teach that kindness to the poor is salvific apart from faith in Christ (p. 110). John the son of Zebedee stands behind the Fourth Gospel (p. 579; admittedly this is a fact that might have been stated more decisively). At dozens of points, Marshall’s treatment is distinguished by the good judgment he exercises in a discipline that sometimes seems awash in fantastic hypotheses.

Naturally no one will agree with all of this book’s arguments or conclusions (e.g. Marshall’s view on “allonymous” authorship of some NT writings). Also there are unavoidable omissions to be lamented: apparently Eckhard Schnabel’s epochal Early Christian Mission (2 vols.; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004) came out too late for Marshall to make extensive use of it. Much of Schnabel’s material could have added substantially to Marshall’s thesis that primordial NT theology was preeminently missionary theology. What is beyond dispute is that in one concise volume Marshall has bequeathed to the discipline the fruit of a lifetime of intelligent, cautious, and God-fearing investigation of the NT’s teaching in its historical setting. Few who consult this book, whether for academic or ministry purposes, will fail to benefit.

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Eckhard Schnabel’s Early Christian Mission is a massive work. His purpose is to provide a comprehensive synthesis of all the relevant historical developments and geographical data concerning the early Christian missionary movement, as well as to offer an exegetical treatment and theological analysis of all the missionary teaching found in early Christian texts (pp. 6, 8; cf. p. 18). No one has taken on such a project with this degree of breadth and magnitude at least since Adolf von Harnack wrote The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries over a hundred years ago. About the only limiting factor in Schnabel’s study of Christian missions is that his focus is on early Christianity, which he defines as the time of Jesus and the apostles (p. 10). Yet Schnabel still presses back in time to examine the OT and Second Temple Jewish texts, and he still gives an occasional glimpse into Christian missionary work after the time of the apostles. Another indication of the scope of Schnabel’s work is the 168-page bibliography, which is undoubtedly the most extensive list of primary and secondary sources relevant to the early Christian mission ever put together. Schnabel himself translated this work into English from the German original, while also revising some arguments and expanding the information at several points (cf. p. xxvii;
on the German edition, see the review by Andreas J. Köstenberger in JETS 46 [2003] 359–60).

One aspect of this two-volume work that adds to its size is the amount of space given to geographical information. Schnabel provides an enormous amount of archaeological, historical, and cultural information about the cities and towns where Jesus and early Christian missionaries preached (or simply might have preached), including detailed descriptions of places stretching from Spain to India. One result is that Schnabel’s presentation of the early Christian mission conveys a sense of reality. Christian missionaries spread the message about Jesus as Lord and Messiah in real cities dominated by pagan religious beliefs, walked along real roads that necessarily took them in specific directions with appropriate stopping points, and traveled on real ships along established trade routes. Therefore, it is not unrealistic for Schnabel to investigate matters such as the distance that the apostle Paul traveled as a missionary (at least 15,500 miles including both land and sea travel, with at least 8,700 miles of that total by walking; p. 1288). One of the interesting sections in the book relates to the extent of geographical knowledge in the Greco-Roman world concerning the people and places beyond the borders of the Roman empire (pp. 444–99), which Schnabel demonstrates was considerable. He argues convincingly that the apostles would have thought about their missionary endeavor from a maximum perspective, that they knew their goal to reach the ends of the earth would take Christian missionaries beyond the borders of the Roman empire and beyond the scope of the Jewish Diaspora. Therefore, for example, widespread knowledge about India and active trade routes there by both land and sea lend historical credibility to traditions about a mission to India by the apostle Thomas (pp. 880–95).

Schnabel is aware that there are drawbacks to having written such a large book (p. xxv). One potential problem with the size is that the book will often be used only as a reference work, scanned for information on isolated topics rather than read through in its entirety as a continuous (and clearly written) historical account of the early Christian mission. As a result, numerous helpful sections may be missed. Some topics within a work on the early Christian mission are, of course, obvious. For example, Schnabel includes an excellent extensive discussion on the Great Commission in Matthew 28 (pp. 348–67). However, many interesting sections appear that could easily be overlooked. In a short list of some examples, I would include the sections on the background and possible parallels of the phrase “fishers of people” (pp. 272, 275–77); the nature of pagan religion and the emperor cult and the challenges that they presented to early Christian missionaries (pp. 602–26); travel conditions and mobility in the first century AD (pp. 632–40); the historical background to the apostolic council in Jerusalem (pp. 1007–11); Paul’s initial missionary work in Arabia (pp. 1032–45); the identity of the proconsul Sergius Paulus (pp. 1082–89); and the reasons for the success of the Christian mission in the first centuries (pp. 1555–61). In addition, the massive amount of background information concerning the geography, history, and culture of the ancient world and the careful examination of secondary literature both add credibility to the decisions that Schnabel makes about debated historical questions. This is important in light of Schnabel’s frequent willingness to defend the historicity of the book of Acts and its account of the early Christian mission (cf. pp. 22–34).

Throughout his work, Schnabel displays a gift for sound judgment. Schnabel’s answers to three commonly debated questions concerning the history of the early Christian mission illustrate his ability to make balanced and careful decisions. First, was there an early Jewish mission? Was there an organized, practical missionary effort by Jewish people directed toward pagans during the Second Temple period? In order to help answer this question, Schnabel examines the OT first (pp. 55–91) and fails to find there any evidence of a mission with the goal of converting all Gentiles to Israel’s
faith. The OT contains missionary ideas but not missionary practice. God is the creator of the world and the Lord of all nations, but there is no active propagation of Israel's faith among the nations. Instead, the conversion of the Gentiles was expected in the "last days." Schnabel then deliberately works through Second Temple Jewish literature, as well as the writings of Roman historians and satirists, the NT, and rabbinic sources, searching for evidence of Jewish missionary practice (pp. 92–172). After sifting through the literature, Schnabel concludes that the evidence for Jewish missionary activity in the centuries before or after the time of Jesus and the apostles is "rather slim, if not decidedly doubtful" (p. 172). The crucial implication is that the existence of a Christian missionary movement cannot be explained through any precedent in the OT or in an early Jewish mission (p. 173).

Second, did Jesus envision a Gentile mission? Step by step Schnabel lays out evidence to demonstrate that he did. Although Jesus understood himself to have been sent by God to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, he also did not avoid contact with Gentiles, and the news of his ministry reached the non-Jewish regions surrounding Galilee (pp. 330–33, 383–84). Jesus called his disciples to be "fishers of people." He included them in his own missionary activity, as he traveled throughout Galilee proclaiming the dawn of God's reign. He trained them to be active missionaries, above all by sending them on a short-term missionary tour. Jesus was apparently preparing them for some task beyond his own work (pp. 272–79, 290, 383–84). Jesus predicted that the good news would be proclaimed to all nations (Mark 13:10; 14:9; pp. 344–47, 384). Also, Schnabel accepts the authenticity of Jesus' missionary command after his resurrection (pp. 348–52). On the basis of his resurrection, Jesus gave his disciples the assignment to go to the nations in order to announce the good news of God's salvation made possible through him. Schnabel states, "If Jesus indeed rose from the dead, I see no reason to deny the possibility that the missionary commission was spoken by Jesus himself" (p. 350). Indeed, why swallow the resurrection and strain out the Great Commission? Above all, Schnabel points out that soon after Easter the first Christians actively sought to convince Gentiles to accept their beliefs about Jesus (pp. 329–30). How did this innovation come about without a command from Jesus, especially if there was no existing model for missionary outreach to Gentiles within Second Temple Judaism? Schnabel presses this question by insisting that the Gentile mission was never controversial within the early Church. During the apostolic period, Christians debated the status of converted Gentiles, the practical, everyday relationships between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians, and the need for Gentile Christians to obey the Torah. However, they never debated the legitimacy of the Gentile mission itself or argued that they should wait for the gathering of the nations to Jerusalem through their own initiative, as promised by the OT prophets (pp. 345, 349, 352, 385).

Third, did the apostle Paul expect churches to engage in evangelistic work? Was it his desire for the Christians in his newly established churches to be active in preaching the gospel to non-Christians or did he assume that this was the task of select individuals, such as himself, who were specially called by God? Schnabel highlights the striking observation that in his letters Paul never directly exhorted believers to be active in missionary work and evangelism or to attempt to bring additional people to faith in Jesus within their own cities or in surrounding villages (p. 1452). What implications follow from this observation? Schnabel seeks a balanced answer to this question. On the one hand, Paul never specifically assigned the task of evangelism to local churches or directed local churches to initiate missionary projects. Such tasks primarily belonged to the apostles and to other missionaries who were commissioned by the churches (pp. 1455, 1485). On the other hand, Paul praised churches and believers for their work in behalf of the gospel (1 Thess 1:8–10; Phil 1:5, 14; 2:14–17, 29–30; 4:3; pp. 1459–67, 1485), and he hoped that the conversations and behavior of believers within their everyday circumstances and within their church meetings might attract unbelievers to
the gospel (1 Cor 7:16; 14:23–25; Eph 6:15; Phil 1:27–30; 2:14–17; Col 4:3–4; 1 Thess 3:12; 1 Tim 2:1–4; Titus 2:3–5, 9–10; pp. 1459, 1467–71, 1485).

One of the overarching goals of Schnabel's work is to offer a discussion about how lessons should be drawn from the early Christian mission for the benefit of missionary work today. Although he welcomes the attempt to adopt principles from the missions of Jesus and the apostles, he insists that they should not be simplistic but always based on "historical clarification, careful exegesis and hermeneutical reflection" (p. 1569). Schnabel follows his own advice, when he touches on various issues of relevance for contemporary missionary work, such as: the church growth movement and the homogeneous unit principle (pp. 365–67); the exclusivist position concerning salvation (pp. 420–34, 1585–87); the role of women in missionary service (pp. 513–15); the possibility of another way of salvation for the Jewish people apart from faith in Jesus as Messiah (pp. 1309–11, 1587); the place for dialogue between people of different faiths (pp. 1393–94); the fate of those who have never heard the gospel (pp. 1403–4); the incarnational model for missions (pp. 1574–75); the inadequacy of liberation theology (pp. 1576–77); and the role of mission agencies (pp. 1578–79). His comments on contextualization are worth mentioning (pp. 1552–55). He clearly sees a place for taking into account the cultural perspectives and religious convictions of others, but he also insists that early Christian missionaries refused to "contextualize" their message in such a manner that the scandal of a crucified Messiah would disappear (p. 1553). One of the reasons why the history of the early Christian mission and Schnabel's book is intriguing is that this commitment to a scandalous message stands so closely together with the surprising success of the early Church.

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Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics is a revision and expansion of Richard Muller's work of the same name with the first volume (prolegomena) originally published in 1987 and the second (on the doctrine of Scripture) in 1993. The new publication adds separate volumes on the doctrines of God and the Trinity. In this definitive work on post-Reformation Reformed theology, Muller has recast the relationship between the Reformation and the post-Reformation era. Traditionally, historians such as Alexander Schweizer, Heinrich Heppe, Paul Althaus, Hans Emil-Weber, and Ernst Bizer argued for a radical discontinuity between the late medieval period and the Reformation/post-Reformation eras. This idea of a radical break portrayed the Reformers as innovators who deviated from centuries of Church history to forge a new way. This theory has been thoroughly debunked by Heiko Oberman who, in such works as The Harvest of Medieval Theology, argued for continuity between late medieval and Reformation thought. The argument for discontinuity was then applied by Schweizer and others to construct a radical break between the first-generation of the Reformation and the post-Reformation era based upon the central dogma of predestination.

Muller has extended this idea of essential continuity through the post-Reformation. Furthermore, he has dispelled the so-called "central dogma" theory of Ernst Bizer, Karl Barth, and others that the theology of post-Reformation Reformed dogmatics centered