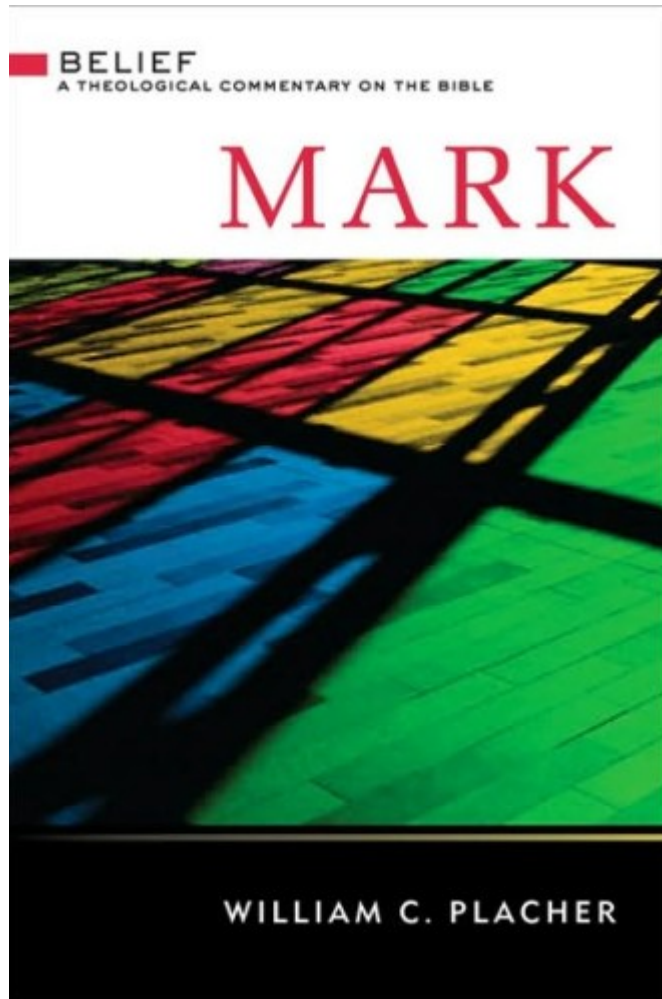


# Reading Mark theologically

By [Robert Cornwall](#)

January 13, 2011

## In Review



## Mark

By William C. Placher  
Westminster John Knox

If your commentary budget has not yet run dry, check out William Placher's new book on the Gospel of Mark, the first in a new series of theological commentaries from Westminster John Knox. Placher, who died in 2008, was to be the co-editor of this series with Amy Plantinga Pauw. This volume, the last thing he wrote, is a fitting legacy.

I appreciate a commentator with deep theological sensitivity, someone who can build a bridge from the ancient text to the present faith experience. Though a theologian by training and not a biblical scholar, Placher demonstrates a keen understanding of the critical issues--but without letting this overwhelm the text's theological insights. As he notes (tipping his hat to Barth), critical scholarship is but the first step toward commentary. In Placher's hands the text comes alive as he interacts with it in the company of Augustine, Calvin and Barth.

Although Mark is the briefest teller of Jesus' story, Placher suggests that we should attend to Mark's presentation because of its historical, political, literary and theological perspectives. Mark's Gospel is closest to Jesus' own lifetime; it demonstrates awareness of the political issues of the day. While it might in some ways lack literary polish, its storytelling is sophisticated. As for theology, in the text we encounter a God who is a fellow-sufferer, one who understands our situation.

Placher takes us through Mark passage by passage, drawing from other theologians as needed and offering occasional "further reflections" on specific topics (Satan, ransom theory). The commentary begins by noting that Mark's original audience was familiar with a "book that started with *archē* (beginning)." Mark's opening lines suggest "a comparison between this story of a recently crucified teacher and the story of God's creation of the whole universe, the beginning of God's sacred Word." This gospel of a new beginning concludes with Mark's shorter ending (16:1-8), which leaves us at the empty tomb, hanging, needing more information.

Placher finds confirmation of the resurrection in Mark's inclusion of the women as witnesses. But the end of Mark is consistent with what Placher calls his "cryptic, dark theology"--which other gospel writers couldn't tolerate. Mark ends without appearances or commissions, offering only

an ambiguity that might fit well our contemporary age, "when a Gospel that ends with Christ triumphantly present is harder to reconcile with the horrors of the world around us and doubts within us. Mark throws the ball to us, as he did to his first readers." Having heard the story, it's our responsibility to keep it alive in our lives and in our testimony.