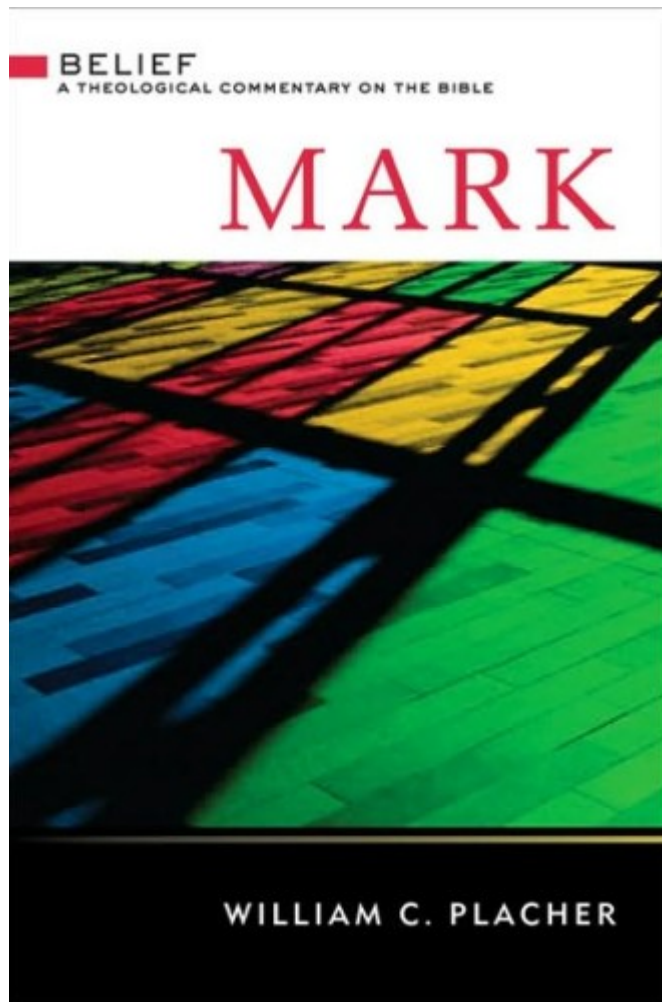


A review of Mark

reviewed by [Susan R. Garrett](#) in the [October 19, 2010](#) issue

In Review



Mark

By William C. Placher
Westminster John Knox

Before his untimely death in November of 2008, William Placher was a celebrated teacher who exercised his gifts of exceptional insight and clarity of expression not

only in the classroom but also in his many books, book chapters and edited works. One project in progress at the time of his passing was a biblical commentary series authored by well-respected theologians and published by Westminster John Knox. The series, called *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*, was founded by Placher and Amy Plantinga Pauw, who designed it to focus on the significance of Bible passages for the church in today's world. Fortunately, Placher's own inaugural volume, on the Gospel of Mark, was all but finished when he died—missing only a concluding personal epilogue. "Thus his commentary, like the Gospel of Mark itself, ends without a sense of final closure," reads the publisher's note at the beginning of the volume.

Having great theologians write biblical commentaries has longstanding precedent (think of Calvin and Luther). Placher and Pauw contend that a return to this practice is needed because historical-critical approaches to scripture "rarely offer much help to either theological reflection or the preaching of the Word." They write that it is professional theologians—as opposed to professional biblical scholars—who are called to "convey the powerful sense of God's merciful presence that calls Christians to repentance and praise."

It's a fine thing for theologians to comment on scripture, and if Placher's volume is representative of those to come, we will all benefit. Yet perhaps the implied indictment of biblical scholarship is overstated. Some recent works by biblical scholars and historical critics have commented profoundly (if not at length) on theological and homiletical aspects of biblical texts. In such works, sustained engagement with the literary, linguistic, rhetorical and other details of a biblical passage is not mere preliminary to the good stuff, but part and parcel of it.

How is Placher's volume different from commentaries written by biblical scholars? Like a traditional commentary, *Mark* offers passage-by-passage exposition. Placher is a very capable exegete, and he attends to issues that any good commentary would consider, but his prioritizing is different. He devotes less space to historical and linguistic concerns and more to theological issues. Specific topics include miracles, the reign of God, the role of Judas in God's plan, Jesus' will in relation to God's will, and love and self-love.

Placher's circle of reference is also different from that in traditional commentaries. He quotes fewer biblical critics but includes many insights from theologians of all eras (Tertullian, Chrysostom, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Barth, Buber, Heschel,

Pannenberg, Aulén and Tanner, to name a few).

An overarching theme in the commentary is Mark's revelation that God suffers with us—an emphasis that Placher sees as highly pertinent today, given the past century's tragedies, as well as the growth of Christianity among the world's poor. Other motifs central to Placher's reading are Jesus' inclusion of the outcast and the radical nature of his deeds and persona. Referring to the Gerasenes' desire for Jesus to leave town after the exorcised swine charged over the cliff, Placher writes, "We modern readers are fooling ourselves if we think that we, by contrast, would have liked having Jesus around. We do not understand Mark's picture of him unless we recognize that he is terrifying."

Placher's treatment of Mark's transfiguration account illustrates the constructive theological emphasis of the commentary as a whole. Here Placher expounds the import of the passage for our understanding of divine presence and of eternity versus eschatology. On the question of divine presence Placher quotes Chrysostom, who said that Christ "opened out a little of the godhead and showed them the indwelling deity." Placher also favors Irenaeus's view that Jesus was revealing God's presence to humans while preserving the invisibility of the Father—his human flesh being like the cleft in the rock where Moses stood while he saw God.

On the question of eternity versus eschatology, Placher cites Kathryn Tanner's argument (building on ideas in Aquinas) that the disciples entered into eternity during the transfiguration. Placher approves of Tanner's effort to respect scientific teaching that our planet will one day blow up or burn out, and to reconceive our relation to God as one that endures outside of time. He contrasts her view with Jürgen Moltmann's argument that the biblical hope is for a radical future transformation of the world and that any appearance of God is a glimpse of that future. Finally, Placher considers Wolfhart Pannenberg's effort to find a compromise: "Eternity has its own kind of duration, so that creatures in their temporality can participate in God's eternity."

Placher's remarks about the need to explain away Mark's portrayal of the transfiguration or to reject any attempt to disentangle it from what really happened seem aimed at the reductionist scholarship of earlier generations, or perhaps of the Jesus Seminar (mentioned twice in the introduction). Yet because of the depth of Placher's discussion of the theological implications of this passage and others, he achieves something that may be new in comparison with other recent

commentaries, even those that are especially attuned to theological questions. I do not know of any other commentary that covers this range of theological issues or that draws so expertly and elegantly on the best that the long history of theology has had to offer.

The commentary is written in Placher's usual engaging style. His lucid reviews of abstract ideas are artfully enlivened with humor, quotations of poetry and reflections on pertinent historical incidents. In considering the transfiguration account, for example, he invites us to ponder the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima on the Feast of the Transfiguration, August 6, 1945. Physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer saw in the explosion "a kind of transfiguration of scientific expertise into horror and death." Placher compares this to how Jesus' disciples saw the transfiguration of a human teacher into the radiance of divine glory. "Humankind may still face a choice between these two transfigurations," he writes.

There are other topics in current popular theology that Placher might have addressed more directly—the upsurge of belief in dispensationalist ("Left Behind") theology, for example, or the way that the spiritual-warfare model for making sense of Satan and the powers has gripped the imagination of Christians worldwide. And there are biblical scholars whose work Placher might have considered—Sharyn Dowd on Mark's view of prayer, power and the problem of suffering, for example, or Amy-Jill Levine on Jesus and purity laws (a topic that Placher does not get quite right). Placher's *Mark* is not a perfect or all-sufficient commentary, but it is an excellent one, full of theological riches for the taking.