

Book review

Joshua P. Yoder

Mark, by Timothy J. Geddert. Believers Church Bible Commentary. Scottsdale: Herald Pr., 2001.

This year the Revised Common Lectionary features the Gospel of Mark. In preparing sermons I've been reading Timothy Geddert's commentary on Mark in the Believers Church Bible Commentary series.

When I pick up a volume in an Anabaptist commentary series, I expect to hear an Anabaptist perspective compared with other possibilities for interpretation. The commentary should represent differing interpretations of a text fairly, and should identify how Anabaptists tend to view it, and why. I also expect information on how the text shaped early Anabaptist understandings about what it meant to follow Jesus. Was it used to support Anabaptist positions? Where does it appear in Anabaptist sources? Finally, of course, I expect responsible scholarship. I want a faithful survey of the major interpretive issues and the positions different scholars have taken. I don't want an exhaustive scholarly treatment of the texts, but rather one that will orient me and point out possible directions for further exploration.

I have an affinity for the literary approach Geddert takes. He seeks to help us understand what Mark meant to communicate about Jesus, rather than digging behind the text for clues about Mark's sources or about the historical Jesus. Though I value that kind of exploration, I prefer not to have it thrown at me. Geddert strikes the right level of scholarly awareness without scholarly minutiae. I agree with his basic hermeneutical stance that though we might not assume that Mark's portrait of Jesus is 100 percent "historically accurate" (whatever that would mean), in reading the Gospel as Scripture we need to assume that Mark portrays Jesus faithfully and that this portrait is useful for the church universal (16–18).

Geddert shows a sensitivity to what the literary structure of Mark can tell us about the meaning of individual passages. He

explores the use of Greek words in Mark and elsewhere in a way that a reader unfamiliar with Greek can appreciate. Geddert also shows humility in his approach to interpretation. He is willing to leave certain questions unanswered, or to preserve a certain agnosticism when definitive answers do not present themselves.

Although many of the essays in the section of the commentary entitled “The Text in the Life of the Church” are thought-provoking, they are not as specific as I would like. I would like more concrete information about the use of the various texts in the life of the church throughout its history, particularly in the Anabaptist tradition. More often, the essays highlight different points of view on particular topics throughout the history of the church, but do not provide much information on the specific ways that a particular passage has been used. I have found that this lack of information characterizes most of the other Believers Church Bible Commentary volumes I have used.

Alongside Geddert, I have been reading Ched Myers’ commentary on Mark, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis Bks., 1988). Myers raises important issues involving the social setting of first-century Palestine to which Geddert gives scant attention. For example, of Mark 2:23–28, Geddert states, “The disciples are probably not *hungry and in need of food* as David was” (70), and he focuses on how this conflict story establishes Jesus’ authority over against the religious establishment. In contrast, Myers writes, “To think the point of this story is Jesus’ ‘Christological prerogative’ . . . is to miss the real issue.” The main point is Jesus’ preference for mercy over sacrifice: the hunger of the poor takes precedence over religious duty (160). Whereas Myers details how the practices of the Pharisees excluded or inconvenienced those without economic means, Geddert gives no attention to this dimension of the text. Although I do not agree with all of Myers’ political interpretations of Mark’s Gospel, I do think that commentaries need to point out the sociopolitical aspects of the Scriptures for those of us who live in a very different world culturally, politically, and economically.

About the reviewer

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