

BOOK REVIEW

Robert L. Plummer, *Paul's Understanding of the Church's Mission* (Paternoster Biblical Monographs; Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006). xviii + 190 pp. Pbk. US\$41.99.

Plummer begins the volume with an introductory chapter in which he sets out to demonstrate the need for the kind of study he undertakes in the volume and to 'make space' for it, so to speak, within the discipline of biblical theology. To make this space, Plummer makes two major moves in the initial chapter. First, he gives two 'broad observations' with regard to the study of missions and evangelism in the field of biblical theology. The first observation—'biblical teaching on missions and evangelism has been neglected by the academy' (p. 3)—creates a sense that an unacceptable gap exists in biblical theology with regard to missions and evangelism. The second observation—'existing studies devoted exclusively to missionary subjects rarely meet the demands of a rigorous biblical theology' (p. 4)—provides a further negative evaluation, namely that previous studies of missions and evangelism have lacked the kind of meticulous attention required to be considered 'good' biblical theology. Together, these two negative observations function to make the claim that not only is there 'space' in the discipline for Plummer's efforts, but there is also a desperate need for the kind of work he offers.

The second move of the chapter consists of Plummer providing support for his observations. The primary means by which he mounts support for his thesis is a lengthy survey (37 pages) of perspectives with regard to the study's main research question: Did the Apostle Paul expect the early Christian communities to engage in 'centrifugal (outward-directed) missionary work' like his own labors, or did he expect the Christian communities to attract others more passively with exemplary lives of faith? The survey covers approaches from a broad span of time from the late nineteenth century to the present, with a division at 1950. Plummer places a break at 1950 because he perceives that prior to

that year studies were characterized by more superficial and non-textual arguments, while after 1950 much more rigorous, textual studies began to appear (though superficial, non-textual arguments by no means disappeared). Within each time span, Plummer discusses approaches from each of the two basic perspectives introduced in the main research question: those who see a continuity between Paul's own evangelistic activity and the missionary activity he expected from his churches ('apostle–church mission continuity') and those who do not ('apostle–church mission discontinuity'). Some of the scholarly perspectives surveyed include those of Gustav Warneck, Roland Allen, Adolf von Harnack, William Wrede, Michael Green, W.P. Bowers, David Bosch, P.T. O'Brien, I.H. Marshall and Eckhard J. Schnabel. The chief conclusion Plummer draws from the survey is that one should not be 'content' with 'assumptions' when trying to answer the research question at hand. Thus, Plummer sets as his agenda to provide 'extensive exegetical support and an over-arching theological framework' for understanding Paul's expectations with regard to his churches' missionary efforts—efforts, Plummer argues in the subsequent chapters, that were to be 'in direct continuity with the apostles' mission because both were determined by God's powerful word' (p. 42).

In Chapter 2, Plummer argues that Paul thought it incumbent upon local churches to be purposefully and outwardly active in missions. He develops this argument by assembling a 'theology of the church's apostolic mission'. Unlike his predecessors, he does not base his theology on the Great Commission (following Warneck) or on the activity of the Holy Spirit (following Allen). Rather, he builds upon what he perceives to be Paul's view of the nature of the gospel itself, emphasizing that Paul understood the gospel as an "effective force" which inevitably goes forth and accomplishes God's will' (p. 50). He writes (p. 55):

To summarize, from our brief consideration of Romans 1:16 and 1 Corinthians 1:17-25, we can conclude that Paul spoke of the gospel as an effective power. The gospel is 'power' because of its source (God), its content (Christ's salvific death and resurrection), and its role in God's plan to save all persons whom he has predestined. God's calling is *effectual* and is made *actual* in the preaching and hearing of the gospel. This dynamic nature of the gospel is in continuity with Old Testament references to 'the word of the Lord'.

Plummer also argues in Chapter 2 that Paul's own missionary efforts were propelled by the dynamic gospel, marshalling evidence from 1 Corinthians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Timothy, Colossians, and Romans (pp. 56-59). Further, Plummer attempts to demonstrate that Paul expected the same dynamic gospel to be actively propelling churches to missionary efforts (pp. 59-64), marshalling evidence from texts such as 1 Thess. 1.8-10 and Col. 3.16-17. In this latter demonstration, Plummer zeroes in on the church as the 'launching point for the powerful word's *self-diffusion*' (p. 61). He bases this point primarily on texts in 1 and 2 Thessalonians and Colossians, where the 'gospel seems to take on a life of its own' (p. 61)—it was the 'word of the Lord' that 'rang out' to surrounding regions (1 Thess. 1.8); it was the 'word of God' that was 'working' in the believer (1 Thess. 2.13); it was the 'word of the Lord' that might advance and be honored (2 Thess. 3.1); and it was the 'word of Christ' that was to dwell richly among the Colossians, propelling them to gratitude and thanksgiving (Col. 3.16-17).

Chapter 2 closes with Plummer's attempt to harmonize Paul's theology of mission (as Plummer defines it) with the broader theology of mission in the New Testament—which Plummer narrows to Luke's theology of mission developed in Acts and the Great Commission at the end of Matthew's Gospel (pp. 64-67). He argues that although Luke emphasizes the role of the Holy Spirit and Matthew emphasizes the command of Christ with regards to mission efforts, Paul's emphasis on the dynamic gospel harmonizes well with them since they are all God-centered (Spirit, Christ, word of God). Further, when taken together, the three perspectives form a three-pronged theological basis for the church's mission.

Chapter 3 is a presentation of Plummer's analyses of several Pauline texts that he believes to be 'Pauline imperatives for the church to engage in mission' (p. 71). First, he examines texts in which he believes Paul commands the church to proclaim the gospel (Phil. 2.16; Eph. 6.15; 1 Cor. 4.16; 7.12-16; 11.1; 14.23-25). Following this is an examination of texts commanding 'passive witness' (2 Cor. 6.3-7; 1 Thess. 2.5-12; Tit. 2.1-10). Plummer himself raises the issue as to whether or not the distinction between 'active' and 'passive' evangelism would have seemed to Paul to be an artificial dichotomy. He concedes that it would 'likely' have been viewed as such and says, though without any supporting evidence, that Paul's understanding of Christian witness 'was more holistic—involving, in one seamless fabric, the Christian's

gospel-determined existence, behavior, and proclamation' (p. 72). I agree with this assessment and wonder why Plummer chose to maintain the dichotomy in the remainder of the chapter. Most likely, the choice was pragmatic, since the dichotomy is used as an organizing principle around which to structure the chapter's material. Unfortunately, however, by keeping the distinction, Plummer has inadvertently perpetuated the false dichotomy.

In my estimation, Plummer's exegetical work is weak for several reasons. First, his choice of some supporting texts seems tenuous and smacks of proof-texting. For example, Plummer cites Eph. 6.15, where the entire reason for citing the verse hangs precariously on the meaning of the term ἑτοιμασία. After claiming the term means 'readiness' (without any discussion of the co-text in which it occurs) Plummer gives a rather unconvincing argument that its use might *perhaps* (even Plummer is carefully non-committal) be an allusion to Isa. 52.7 and/or Nah. 1.15—2.15. Plummer's theory is that if there is an allusion to one or both of these texts, it is because Paul sees them as descriptive of preaching the gospel. But the real problem here is that Plummer's use of this text for support of his position rests on shaky evidence.

Secondly, as with traditional exegesis generally, Plummer's method overemphasizes the meanings of individual words, with no real discussion of syntagmatic relations of words in their co-text. Plummer's discussion of Eph. 6.15 provides an example of this also. Attempting to marshal further support for an evangelistic reading of the verse, he appeals to the 'possible evangelistic connotations' of Paul's use of the term μάχη in 6.17 (p. 80). He writes, 'The weapon described here, the μάχη, was a short, sharp sword used in close-range offensive combat. This image of the "word of God" as an offensive weapon ties in with Paul's frequent references to the "word of God" as a dynamic force, which inevitably advances' (p. 80). Plummer clearly reads the idea of offensive combat back into this text, since it appears from the context that the reason for putting on the armor in the first place is *defensive* rather than *offensive*. Paul tells the Ephesians to put on the armor of God so that they 'are able to stand against the attacks of the devil' (Eph. 6.11; cf. the *στα verbs in 6.11-13 and surrounding co-text). In context, believers are under attack, not doing the attacking. Plummer's interpretation of μάχη is not co-text sensitive, and, therefore, fails to stand up to scrutiny.

Thirdly, Plummer occasionally makes dubious claims with regard to grammar and syntax. For example, in his discussion of Phil. 2:14-16, he over-exegetes the force of the imperative form in v. 14 (ποιεῖτε) by claiming that it ‘imparts an imperatival sense to all of 2:14–16a’ (p. 76). This allows him to claim further that in 2:16b, ‘Paul says that the church should do all the things mentioned in 2:14–16a “so that [he] can boast on the day of Christ that [he] did not run or labor in vain”.’ Still further, if ‘the fact [is] that this boast remains contingent on the Philippians’ continued obedience to Paul’s instructions in 2:14–16a’, then the participle ἐπέχοντες ‘has an imperatival sense’ (pp. 76–77). It is important to Plummer that the participle ἐπέχοντες (‘holding out’) in v. 16 has an imperatival sense, so that he can claim ‘we find in Philippians 2:16 explicit instructions from Paul for the church to evangelize’ (p. 77). This interpretation runs into difficulty at several points. It is doubtful, even in a hortatory text, that the imperative form ποιεῖτε gives the other verbal elements of the clause complex an imperatival sense. And, if it does, why does Plummer focus attention on the participle ἐπέχοντες and not the finite φαίνεσθε in v. 15, which formally could be either indicative or imperative? Further, it is an overstatement to say that the text gives ‘explicit instructions...to evangelize’. Doing so disregards both clause structure and clause relations. For example, the participle ἐπέχοντες is in a secondary embedded clause that has been shifted down the rank-scale to function as a verb-modifying word group modifying φαίνεσθε in v. 15. In other words, this embedded clause provides auxiliary information, not explicit instructions to evangelize—not to mention that the entire clause, ἐν οἷς φαίνεσθε κτλ, is itself a secondary clause that appears to be giving auxiliary information about where the Philippian Christians ‘shine’ (γενεᾶς, v. 15). In the end, Plummer’s work here is an example of over-exegesis due to being linguistically under-informed.

In Chapter 4 Plummer cites ‘incidental’ evidence from Paul’s writings for active evangelism. These include divine confirmation through miracles, Paul’s prayers regarding taking the gospel to those who have not yet heard it, Paul’s emphasis on teaching and building up churches, which is an ‘extension’ of his (and others’) missionary work, and suffering for the gospel. Plummer rightly calls this evidence ‘incidental’, since the texts he discusses here treat evangelism at higher levels of abstraction. In many cases, one has to ‘read between the lines’

to find support for Plummer's thesis, which, unfortunately, was also the case for some of the texts treated in the exegesis chapter.

The final chapter reiterates the conclusions of each of the previous chapters and draws out their implications. Plummer claims to have demonstrated in the first four chapters that Paul expected the churches he founded to be actively engaged in evangelism. From this, Plummer highlights one further point:

Unlike some recent missiologists who have proposed that the apostolic mission is inherited by a para-church 'apostolic band', Paul understands missions as an ecclesiastical task. The apostolic mission devolves on each church *as a whole*—not on any particular member or group. Each individual member within the church, then, will manifest missionary activity according to his or her particular gifting and life situation. All but the unrepeatability aspects of the apostles' mission (e.g. eyewitness testimony and initial promulgation of authoritative revelation) devolve upon the church *as a whole* (p. 144).

The main implication of this for the church is that 'missions...should be returned to the church' (p. 144) and, according to Plummer, the most effective way for the church to do missions is to 'preach and teach the gospel accurately' (p. 144). One wonders if the point of the whole work was not so much to fill a perceived gap in biblical theology, but to give a negative evaluation of para-church missions organizations (though Plummer denies this in a footnote). While it may be true that some local churches have 'outsourced' mission work, one wonders how applicable Plummer's generalization is to 'the church' (universal).

In the end, it is my opinion that this book is not nearly as strong as I had hoped it would be. In fact, I am not convinced that Plummer has met the stringent criterion ('rigorous biblical theology') that he lays out in the introductory chapter. That said, I do believe it is beneficial for the church to be continually reminded of her missionary and evangelistic responsibilities.

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