

Evangelism and the Early Church

What do we know about the disciples as missionaries?

Professor of New Testament Dr. Eckhard Schnabel's groundbreaking research on evangelism in the early church was recently published in his two-volume *Early Christian Mission* (InterVarsity, 2004). It is the first comprehensive study of mission in the early church since Adolf von Harnack's work in 1902. What made early Christian missionaries so unique? In the first part of our "Sharing the Gospel" series, Dan Reid of InterVarsity Press discusses the book with Dr. Schnabel.

Reid: What prompted you to take on this project?

Schnabel: When I was asked in 1989 to lecture on the missionary work of the early church, I quickly realized that there was no comprehensive monograph on this topic. There was not even a synthetic study of Paul's missionary work. Once I had outlined my lecture series, I sensed that this could well be the provisional outline of a book.

Reid: Your study is very concrete. For instance, you give us descriptions of many of the places that Jesus, the disciples, Paul, and others visited or might have visited in their missionary work. What concerns pressed you in this direction?

Schnabel: From the beginning, my target audience included people who do what Jesus and the apostles did—missionaries who preach the good news of Jesus Christ and who plant churches in unreached areas. Since missionaries are busy people, they have often not taken the time to analyze New Testament texts carefully from a historical perspective before deriving "lessons" for modern missionary work. Also, in some areas, such as geographical knowledge in the ancient world, even New Testament scholars are not always fully abreast of specialized scholarship. I therefore decided to include a relatively large amount of historical detail in my work to ground the missionary work of the early church in the historical, geographical, and social realities of the first century.

Reid: Did you have any notable preconceptions of early Christian mission that were overturned or surprisingly altered by your research? If so, what were they?

Schnabel: Initially I shared the traditional consensus that the apostles continued the missionary work of the Jewish community of their time, although with a different



message. After more research I joined the growing number of scholars who dispute that there ever was an early Jewish mission to Gentiles, and I became convinced that there were no Greek or Roman models either for a movement that proactively sought to expand internationally and cross-culturally. This means that the early Christian mission was without precedent in the ancient world, a conclusion whose consequences I sought to highlight.

Reid: Just how new and startling a thing is this development on the religious landscape of the ancient Mediterranean world?

Schnabel: The novelty of the “universal” dimension of the early Christian mission cannot be overestimated. This dimension is linked, of course, with the conviction that forgiveness of sins is possible for Jews and non-Jews, for the educated and for the barbarians, for men and women, for rich and poor—but only through faith in Jesus Messiah and *Kyrios* [Lord]. And it was this conviction that got the apostles, specifically, but also the church in general, in big trouble in the first century and with even more violence and suffering in the second and third centuries. The novelty of the internationally and cross-culturally expanding early Christian movement also testifies to the courage and audacity of the apostles, who were willing to trust Jesus’ promise of his presence “to the ends of the earth” while having to operate without available models.

Reid: You point out that early Christian mission has been badly ignored by New Testament histories and theologies. Why do you think this is the case?

Schnabel: One reason may have been an aversion to present synthetic studies. It has only been in more recent years that more New Testament scholars have published a “New Testament Introduction,” a “Theology of the New Testament,” or a “New Testament History.” This aversion, more often than not, at least in Europe, can be traced to the results of the traditional historical-critical study of the New Testament texts, which has abandoned the notion of the unity of Scripture and which has failed to produce a consensus in many fields of inquiry. Another reason may be the fact that very few New Testament scholars have had firsthand missionary experience themselves. Moreover, the hermeneutical horizon of the Enlightenment, with its demand for tolerance and understanding, often produced contempt for contemporary missionary work, which is hardly conducive for writing about the early Christian mission.

Reid: What conclusions have you drawn from your investigation?

Schnabel: One major conclusion from my study of Paul’s apostolic ministry is that we need to be very careful not to pay lip service to our reliance upon the triune God and his Word in our own ministries of church planting and church nurture, while relying in fact on models and approaches derived from management studies or sociological models. Paul was

always very much aware of the fact that the message of “Christ crucified” is a fundamental problem in doing missionary work, but he consistently refused to “contextualize” his message in such a manner that this “problem” would disappear. I think there is a very important lesson here, in a time where allegedly seeker-focused models of ministry see no need even to read Scripture in worship services.

Reid: Can you give us a couple of popular “myths” about early Christian mission that you hope your work will correct?

Schnabel: As a result of my research into what we can know about the ministry of the Twelve after Pentecost, I came to doubt the popular notion that Paul was the only major missionary among the Gentiles, or at least the missionary to the Gentiles par excellence—this impression may be little more than the result of Luke’s silence about the Twelve in Acts 3-28, ignoring the fact that Luke himself gives us several hints about the missionary competence and initiative of the Twelve. We must not forget that if indeed Jesus’ missionary commission is historically authentic, as I argue in the book, the “great commission” was given to the Twelve, not to Paul! A second popular evangelical “myth” is the view that the early Christians were a united group of activists, willing and eager to subordinate differences of opinion and behavior to the missionary mandate. A serious study of the book of Acts and of Paul’s letters shows, of course, that this was not the case, as there were serious challengers to the gospel as preached by Peter and Paul.



In the next issue: How do we, as Christians, unknowingly block the spread of the gospel? Research Professor of Church History Dr. John Woodbridge will discuss his new book, *The Mark of Jesus*.

Reid: What about popular scholarly “myths” about early Christian mission?

Schnabel: One scholarly myth that I seek to counter is the view that there were several, perhaps competing, apostolic “missions” with different theologies, represented by the people of the Q community, by James, by Peter, by Paul, and later by the author of the book of Acts. I found no evidence of competing missionary initiatives (I argue that Paul’s opponents, for example, in Galatia were not missionaries but teachers), and I conclude that there was much more substantial theological unity between Paul, Peter, James, and John than some critical scholars would allow.

Reid: What aspects of New Testament theology take on a new profile when viewed through the lens of the missionary context of the New Testament?

Schnabel: As regards Paul’s proclamation of Jesus as Messiah and Lord, we need to explain how this proclamation of a crucified *Christos* confronted Greek and Roman audiences with a faith that stood in stark contrast to both the old ideology of the *polis* (with its egalitarian structures that excluded the weak and the aliens) and the new ideology of the *Imperium Romanum* (with its hierarchical structures that emphasized the divinity of the emperor and other members of the imperial family). Faith in and allegiance to a crucified God, a Jewish Savior of the world, was scandalous and nonsensical. Just as nonsensical was the suggestion that a new community of people might be formed in which

neither ethnic nor social differences play any role, in which everybody is focused on sacrificial love for fellow believers and fellow citizens, and in which they expectantly hope for the return of Jesus and the restoration of a world unmarred by any imperfection.

Reid: For those of us with hazy notions of what the ancients knew about world geography, you provide an impressive amount of detail. Did you originally plan to go into the topic in such depth?

Schnabel: Once I started to research the available geographical knowledge in the ancient world, I found the subject matter so illuminating that I did not want to keep it for myself! As I was aware of the fact that the project was becoming very large, I agonized over the question of whether I should simply omit my historical background chapters, as well as the long section on geography. I finally decided to include this material in order to allow readers to see for themselves how detailed and how widespread geographical information was in the ancient world.

Reid: Is there much scholarship or evidence regarding second-century Christian mission, particularly of the sort that might shed light on the first century?

Schnabel: It would indeed have been an advantage if I had been able to consult historical studies and theological analyses of missionary work in the second century, in order to ascertain any continuity or discontinuity in missionary practice. While some writing has been done in this area, many relevant questions have not even been raised by patristic scholars.

Reid: Do you have any aspirations to continue your research and write on the expansion of Christianity in the second and third centuries?

Schnabel: Not at this time, although it is an urgent necessity that someone does this. There have been several New Testament scholars who were, or became, experts in patristic studies—Theodor Zahn is perhaps the best example—but there are so many worthwhile projects in the area of New Testament exegesis and theology that I wait for a competent patristic scholar to bring Adolf Harnack’s *Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries* up-to-date for the second, third, and early fourth centuries. ▲

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Dr. Eckhard J. Schnabel came to Trinity from Freie Theologische Akademie in Giessen, Germany, where he served as chair of the New Testament Department. He also taught at Wiedenstein Bible College in Bergneustadt, Germany, and at Asian Theological Seminary in Manila, Philippines. He has served with Operation Mobilisation in Latin America and Europe, and with the Overseas Missionary Fellowship in Asia. Dr. Schnabel graduated from the Staatsunabhängige Theologische Hochschule in Basel, Switzerland, with the equivalent of a Master of Theology. He received the Doctor of Philosophy in New Testament from Aberdeen University, Scotland. Dr. Schnabel’s areas of expertise include early Jewish history and theology, Pauline exegesis and theology, early Christian history, biblical theology, and hermeneutics.