



**UNIVERSIDADE CATÓLICA PORTUGUESA
FACULDADE DE TEOLOGIA**

**MESTRADO INTEGRADO EM TEOLOGIA (1.º grau
canónico)**

JAMES HO NGO LU VIEN, SVD

**DISCIPLESHIP IN MARK'S GOSPEL
AND ITS IMPLICATIONS TO
CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS LIFE**

**Dissertação Final
sob orientação de:
Prof. Doutor ARNOLD T. MONERA Ph.D.-S.T.D**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER ONE: A GLIMPSE AT MARK’S GOSPEL	
1. Author of the Gospel	3
2. Intended Audience, Place, Date and Occasion for Writing.....	5
3. Literary Style of Mark’s Gospel	9
4. Special Interests of Mark.....	13
CHAPTER TWO: THE CHALLENGE OF DISCIPLESHIP IN TH GOSPEL OF MARK	
1. Discipleship and the Purpose of the Gospel	19
2. Language of Discipleship in Mark	20
3. Nature of Jesus’ Call to Discipleship	24
4. Positive Aspects of Discipleship in Mark	29
5. The Negative Portrayal of the Disciples in Mark.....	31
6. Interpretation of the Negative Portrayal of Disciples.....	38
7. Minor Characters as Positive Models of Discipleship	41
7.1. The Healing of Blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46-52)	42
7.2. The Poor Widow (Mark 12:41-44)	43
CHAPTER THREE: THE IMPLICATIONS OF MARKAN DISCIPLESHIP TO CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS LIFE	
1. Called to Participate in the Mission of Jesus	49
2. Called to Participate in the Mission of the Church	51
3. Call to a Life of Witnessing	52
CONCLUSION	58
BIBLIOGRAPHY	61

INTRODUCTION

As a professed member of the Society of the Divine Word (S.V.D.), an international religious missionary congregation, I have always pondered on what it means to be a missionary in the 21st century world – a global society characterized by advancement in science, medicine, and digital technology on one hand, but also by civil unrest, genocide, terrorism, widening gap between rich and poor nations, poverty, global warming and religious intolerance on the other hand. How can I be a missionary in this world that I am in? This question was and still haunting me. Hence, after five years of theological studies I have decided to write something about the issue. I have chosen the topic “Discipleship in Mark’s Gospel and Its Implications to Contemporary Religious Life” for my thesis.

I chose the gospel of Mark because it is the earliest to be written, hence also the earliest portrait of Jesus’ disciples. Moreover, the theme of discipleship is central in the Markan gospel. The evangelist Mark is very realistic in his portrayal of the disciples of Jesus.

The dissertation is divided into three chapters:

Chapter 1 introduces us to the Gospel of Mark in general. It situates the theme of discipleship within the larger context, i.e., the whole gospel.

Chapter 2 is the heart, so to say, of the dissertation as it focuses on the theme of discipleship. It shows how important is discipleship in the literary structure of the gospel of Mark. This chapter gives us a semantic analysis of the terms associated with discipleship; it explains the nature of Jesus’ call to discipleship; it presents Mark’s realistic portrayal of Jesus’ disciples; and proposes some minor characters in the Gospel as positive models of discipleship.

The last chapter is an attempt to appropriate the Markan theme of discipleship to contemporary religious life. What does it mean to be a disciple in the 21st century? Specifically, the writer wishes to relate it to his being a religious missionary of the Society of the Divine Word.

All the biblical citations in this paper are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

CHAPTER ONE

A GLIMPSE AT MARK'S GOSPEL

The Gospel according to Mark, which is the shortest of the four, is commonly considered by contemporary biblical scholars as the earliest attempt to put into writing the apostolic tradition about Jesus the Messiah. The author was the first evangelist to bring together within a geographical, chronological and theological framework the existing traditions concerning Jesus. Following the documentary hypothesis generally accepted by contemporary scholars, both Matthew and Luke made use of Mark as one of the sources for their gospels.¹ Thus, this paper upholds the Markan priority.

1. Author of the Gospel

As in the case of the other canonical gospels, the actual author of the Gospel according to Mark is anonymous, i.e., nowhere in the Gospel does the author reveal his identity. It is an accepted fact that the names of the evangelists (e.g., “The Gospel According to Mark”) were added only until sometime in the second century.² Thus, Marie Noonan Sabin comments, “There is some reason to believe that the early church was less interested in knowing the actual

¹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*, Revised Edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 159: “Mark has been the most popular of the Synoptics for scholars of the twentieth century. The first reason was the thought that Mark provided the earliest and most reliable historical source for those seeking to uncover the historical Jesus. When the Synoptic problem was solved in favor of Markan priority, Mark’s gospel ... could be regarded as an unbiased witness.” This positive evaluation of the Markan Gospel was lacking, if not missing, in the early and medieval church because of the widespread opinion that Mark had only condensed Matthew’s version. Even Augustine thought that way. Prior to the 19th century, it was generally believed that Matthew was the first Gospel to be written, followed by Luke and then Mark. Today there are still a few scholars who would not believe that Mark was the earliest of the Gospels.

² See the study on this issue by Martin Hengel, *Studies in the Gospel of Mark* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 64-84. It can be cited that there was a tendency in the early church to attribute the Gospels to personal followers of Jesus, thus Matthew, John. Also Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (The Anchor Bible Reference Library; New York: Doubleday, 1997), 158.

authorship than in connecting the Gospel narratives with apostolic witnesses.”³ Our oldest tradition or evidence, although external, ascribing the authorship of the Gospel to Mark goes back to Papias, an early second century writer and bishop of Hierapolis who tells us that “Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately, however, not in order, all that he recalled of what was either said or done by the Lord ...”⁴ This second century attribution of Mark as the follower and interpreter of Peter is usually identified with the John Mark mentioned in Acts of the Apostles, whose mother had a house in Jerusalem (Acts 12:12, 25; 15:37, 39).⁵ This John Mark is said to be the cousin of Barnabas and both became the travelling companions of Paul during the so-called first missionary journey (Acts 13:5). Perhaps another support to link John Mark and Peter is to be found in 1 Peter 5:13 where Peter mentions “Mark, my Son”. Thus, “on the strength of Papias’s statement and the affirmation of it by other early Christian writers, the Gospel is traditionally ascribed to Mark the ‘interpreter of Peter’ and placed in Rome after Peter’s death *ca.* AD 64-67.”⁶ Today, there are contemporary scholars who are generally hesitant of linking the Gospel of Mark to Peter on internal grounds, since Peter is heavily

³ Marie Noonan Sabin, *The Gospel According to Mark* (New Collegeville Bible Commentary New Testament, Vol. 2; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006), 5.

⁴ This citation is given in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.39.15. The citation also admits that Mark neither heard nor followed the Lord but later become a follower of Peter. See Werner Georg Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, Revised Edition, trans. Howard Clark Kee (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975; ninth printing 1990), 95-96, on his objection to the relationship of the author of the Gospel of Mark to Peter.

⁵ See Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 127. Jerome, who translated the Bible into Latin, likewise believed that the author of the Gospel was John Mark of Acts (15:37-38), but that the Gospel originated in Egypt.

⁶ Daniel J. Harrington, “The Gospel According to Mark,” in Raymond E. Brown *et al.* (eds.), *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Student Edition (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1993), 596. See also Mary Ann Tolbert, “The Gospel According to Mark: Introduction,” in *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 1801. Other modern scholars (e.g., Mark W. Marxsen and W. Kelber) have theorized “on the basis of the references to Galilee in 14:28 and 16:7 that the Gospel was written in the rural areas of northern Galilee or Syria, where some Jerusalem Christians may also have fled during the Jewish-Roman war” (*idem*, 1802).

criticized in the narratives.⁷ Moreover, if John Mark of the Acts wrote the Gospel, as scholars observe, how come the author “has no personal knowledge of Palestinian geography, as the numerous geographical errors show” (see Mark 5:1; 7:31; 10:1).⁸ In short, the author of the Gospel of Mark is unknown to us.

2. Intended Audience, Place, Date and Occasion for Writing

Sabin reminds us that “since we do not know for certain the author of the Gospel, we also cannot be certain of its intended audience.”⁹ Agreeing with ancient tradition, a number of scholars hold that the Gospel was written in Rome for the Gentile Christians.¹⁰ They point to some internal indications in the Gospel itself that point to a non-Palestinian, Gentile destination of Mark. The indications are as follows:

First, for the benefit of the Gentile Christians, Mark translates Aramaic words and phrases:

Talitha koum, meaning “Little girl, rise up!” (Mark 5:41)

Ephphatha, meaning “Be released” or “Be opened” (Mark 7:34)

Abba, meaning “Father” (Mark 14:36)

Eloi, Eloi, meaning “My God, my God” (Mark 15:34)

Second, the author also explains certain Jewish customs and practices. In Mark 7:3-4 it reads:

For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders, and they do not eat

⁷ See the discussion in Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 158-161.

⁸ Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 97; Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 127. See Kümmel for his other arguments for the unreliability of John Mark as the author of the Gospel.

⁹ Sabin, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 5.

¹⁰ This position was first held by Clement of Alexandria by the end of the second century. It was likewise held by Irenaeus, Origen, Eusebius, Jerome, among others. A look at contemporary commentaries on Mark would always include Rome as one of the more probable places of writing.

anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.

Another example is found in Mark 14:12 where the author had to explain that “on the first day of Unleavened Bread, the Passover Lamb is sacrificed.” It would be superfluous to explain these traditional Jewish practices if the author was writing to a Jewish audience.

Third, in Mark’s Gospel we also find the presence of several Latin words in the Greek text which perhaps point to its Roman destination (e.g., μόδιος [“modios” 4:21]; λεγιών [“legion” 5:9, 15], σπεκουλάτωρ [speculator 6:27]; δηνάριον [“denarius” 6:37]; κήνσος [census 12:14]; αὐλή [aula 15:16]; κεντυρίων [“centurion” 15:39]). The κοδράντες (Latin: *quadrans*) coin of Mark 12:42 was not circulated and thus not used in the East. The presence of these Latin loanwords in the Greek text may suggest a locale where Latin was spoken, thus Rome.¹¹

Fourth, there is a special emphasis in Mark’s Gospel on Jesus’ mission to the Gentiles (cf. 5:1-41; 7:24-37; 8:1-10; 11:17).

Fifth, the gospel exhibits a clear antagonism or dislike to the Jewish laws, customs and traditions (cf. 2:1 – 3:6; 7:1-23).

To summarize, based from internal indications, the Gospel of Mark thus seemed to be envisioned to an audience consisting mainly of Gentile Christians who did not know Aramaic,

¹¹ While it can be argued that many of the Latinisms (which are commercial or military words) may be found anywhere in the Roman Empire, Hengel counters that the description of the woman as a Greek and Syrophenician in Mark 7:26 represents linguistic usages of the West, and thus probably of Rome (*Studies in the Gospel of Mark*, 29).

living in an area where Latin was used. Although the above details may not offer a conclusive proof for the Roman origin of the Gospel, early traditions have been strongly in favor of Rome.¹²

Assuming that the audience of the Markan Gospel are Gentile Christians in Rome, are there internal clues from the Gospel itself to show the situation or setting of the intended audience of the Gospel? “The story that the Gospel of Mark tells”, according to Tolbert, “is clearly suited to the needs of Christians under persecution, either in actuality or in potential.”¹³ Behind the Markan Gospel’s emphasis on the suffering of Jesus, as well as of the necessity of self-denial and suffering of those who follow him (Mark 8:34-37), scholars see a possible indication “that the readers for whom the gospel was written were now in danger of such persecution, and needed to be told that such persecution did not mean their faith in Jesus as God’s savior had been misplaced.”¹⁴ It is also probable that Mark’s emphasis on the intimate connection between suffering and discipleship in the whole Gospel could be an indication that this community continued to experience open conflict with a local Jewish synagogue that actively rejected Christian claims about Jesus (as the crucified and vindicated Son of God). Bart Ehrman suggests that this conflict at times turned hostile.¹⁵ This explains why Mark in the Gospel emphasizes that Jewish leaders, especially the Pharisees, failed to understand Jesus and

¹² While most of the scholars favor Rome, there are a few who localize Mark’s addressees closer to Palestine, in Syria or in the northern Transjordan. They have, however, not gained much support.

¹³ Tolbert, “The Gospel According to Mark,” 1801. In a similar tone, Brown confirms that the author “addressed himself to a community that seemingly had undergone persecution and failure” (*An Introduction to the New Testament*, 127).

¹⁴ Paul J. Achtemeier, “Gospel of Mark,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 4, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 544.

¹⁵ Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, Second Edition (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 74.

that following him involves a high cost. “For Mark, following Jesus is not a ticket to glory; it is the path to suffering; being a disciple does not bring exaltation but humiliation and pain.”¹⁶

The most obvious passage in Mark is Chapter 13 which has references to the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple.¹⁷ In the words of Tolbert, “The reference to the future life of the community has made chap. 13 the primary source for speculations on the dating of the Gospel at or during the first Jewish-Roman war and on the issues facing the audience for whom it was written.”¹⁸ Obviously, the content of Mark 13 shows traces of the threatening nearness of the Jewish war. In fact, Young opines that the evangelist’s comment “let the reader understand” in 13:14 in brackets “may indicate that the war in Jerusalem was already underway when Mark wrote his Gospel.”¹⁹ If such was the case, then the Gospel could be dated between about 66-70 C.E. The Temple of Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in the year 70 C.E. Its destruction was the traumatic end to the four-year revolt of the Jews against Rome. As foretold in 13:14 (“let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains”), “historically, Christians actually did flee Jerusalem when the armies of Titus invaded in C.E. 67, many of them traveling to Pella in the Decapolis and showing that, as readers of the Gospel, they did understand.”²⁰ It was particularly difficult for Christians living in Rome, Syria, or Galilee because the Romans regarded them as Jews, but to the Jews they were outcasts. Because of these turbulent times, Mark wrote to

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Especially verses 2 and 14. According to Udo Schnelle, “both verses, in their present macrocontext, refer to the destruction of the temple by the Romans in 70 CE” (*The History and Theology of the New Testament Writings*, trans. Eugene Boring [London: SCM Press Ltd, 1998], 201-202).

¹⁸ See the commentary of Tolbert, “The Gospel According to Mark,” 1835. Brown explains that the overheated expectation of an imminent parousia by the recipients that one finds in Mark 13 is “probably activated by persecution which they had undergone and during which a considerable number had failed” (*An Introduction to the New Testament*, 163).

¹⁹ David M. Young, *Extreme Discipleship: Following Jesus from the Gospel of Mark* (Montgomery, AL: E-Book Time, 2007), 21.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 215.

instruct and encourage such Christians, especially by emphasizing Jesus' passion.²¹ Sabin nicely describes the post-Temple scenario and its relation to the writing of the Gospels:

After the Temple fell...the Pharisaic leaders became less tolerant of diversity within their ranks. In that new atmosphere, Jewish followers of Jesus were regarded with suspicion and put out of the synagogues. The Christian-Jewish community responded with anger. In the context of the post-seventies, the Pharisees appeared hostile to Jesus, and it is that hostility (and their own anger) that the evangelists retroactively projected into their accounts of Jesus' time.²²

Were the Christians in Rome persecuted at all? Brown believes that "although Christians were harassed in various places, only the capital city's Christian community [which is Rome] is known to have undergone major Roman persecution before 70 C.E., namely, under Nero."²³

Summing up: Based on the understanding of Mark 13, it can be proposed that the date for the composition of Mark's Gospel was sometime around the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. Kümmel concludes, "Most scholars assign a date in the years 64-70, since the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70 is mentioned not unambiguously, but some scholars consider a date after 70 more likely for the composition."²⁴

3. Literary Style of Mark's Gospel

The Greek word εὐαγγέλιον (lit. "good news," "glad tidings") as part of the current vocabulary of the primitive Church did not refer to a type of literature or to a book in the first

²¹ Edwin D. Freed, *The New Testament: A Critical Introduction*, Third Edition (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2001), 124.

²² Sabin, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 7. Before the destruction of the Temple, Judaism was tolerant of many different forms of expression. Christianity did not begin as a separate religion, but rather as a new formulation of the ancient Jewish faith.

²³ Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 162. See also Freed, *The New Testament*, 124: "The author was writing to those who were already Christians in Rome who were persecuted during and after the time of Nero (54-68)."

²⁴ Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 98.

century. The term had a more dynamic meaning; it was a proclamation of an event of major importance.²⁵ “Gospel” for the primitive Church designated God’s saving actions in and through the person of Jesus. This was the εὐαγγέλιον that the apostles preached.²⁶ It is interesting to note that of the Synoptics, only Mark starts his literary work with the word εὐαγγέλιον: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus, the Son of God.”²⁷ We are aware of the fact that scholars debate whether the word “good news” or “gospel” refers to the whole written work of Mark or to the proclamation of and about Christ. But surely Mark’s use of the word “gospel” in 1:1 is special or unique – one that is filled with religious meaning.²⁸ For him, εὐαγγέλιον is “not only the ‘glad tidings’ about the saving life, death and resurrection of Jesus but also and more importantly that Christ himself is the good news....”²⁹ Perhaps influenced by Mark’s use in his written work, “gospel” became a designation of a Christian form of writing later in the history of the church. It is therefore not too much to affirm that “Mark is the first Christian writer to take this widely known term from the sphere of oral proclamation and use it to designate a literary composition. He is thus the originator of a new type of literature called the ‘gospels’.”³⁰

At the outset we have to say that the stylistic features of Mark are more noticeable in the original language than in (English) translations. While Mark wrote in *Koinē* Greek, his writing style is unimpressive. It is not written in fluent Greek. His grammar is often the roughest so that

²⁵ PHEME PERKINS, *Introduction to the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 1.

²⁶ Therefore the context of the original usage of the term “gospel” was oral proclamation or apostolic preaching.

²⁷ Matthew begins his story, “*Biblos* (βίβλος- an account) of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah”; while Luke refers to his work as a *kathexēs* (καθεξῆς - an orderly account).

²⁸ Freed, *The New Testament*, 55. According to Harrington, “Mark created the literary genre of Gospel... As the first one to write an account of Jesus’ ministry in an orderly fashion, Mark appears to have created a model followed and developed by other evangelists” (“The Gospel according to Mark,” 597).

²⁹ Warren Dicharry, C.M., *Mark, Matthew, & Luke* (Human Authors of the New Testament, 1; Collegeville, MN: 1990), 29.

³⁰ Fr. Michael Naickanparampil & Fr. Jacob Theckanath, *The Gospel of Mark* (Bible Correspondence Course Notes; Bangalore, India, n.d.), 10.

there is a need for both Matthew and Luke to refine or polish it for improvement. There is a tendency for Mark to be verbose and clumsy (see 1:35; 9:3). Yet Mark's detail is often more vivid than in Matthew and Luke.³¹ A quick browse at the resource book *Synopsis of the Four Gospels*³² will clearly show this. Mark's Gospel is the only that uses Aramaic phrases at key moments of the narrative: *Talitha kuom* (5:41); *Ephphatha* (7:34); *Eloi Eloi* (15:34). Mark often uses direct speech in his narrative and is fond of using the historical present tense ("he comes", "he says", "they go") which occurs over 150 times, hence offering a sense of immediacy.³³ His sentence structure is paratactic, i.e., phrases or clauses are linked together by a continuous use of the conjunction *καί* ("and") or *καὶ εὐθύς*³⁴ ("and immediately"), which gives his narrative an immediate quality. For instance, in chapter one alone, Mark uses *εὐθύς* eleven times. "To our ears," says Perkins, "that style sounds as though a young child were the narrator. Or it could give the impression that the Evangelist did not have the ability to compose a literary piece."³⁵ In fairness to Mark, however, we have to understand that his gospel was meant directly to be *heard* (rather than *read* since many people in those days were illiterate) by ordinary people, to the non-theological mind. While it is also true that the various traditions that Mark collected are loosely linked together by such expressions as 'and', 'again', 'immediately', 'and it happened,' 'from there', 'he went', 'in those days', etc., which do not show any biographical-chronological interest

³¹ See the cure of the paralytic (2:1-12), the expulsion of the legion of devils (5:1-20), the death of John the Baptist (6:1-5), the transfiguration of Jesus (9:2-8), the prayer and agony in the Garden of Gethsemane (14:32-42).

³² Kurt Aland, *Synopsis of the Four Gospels: Greek-English Edition of the Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum*, Third Edition (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1979).

³³ José Maria Casciaro (ed.), *The Gospel and Acts of the Apostles* (The Navarre Bible; Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), 195.

³⁴ The Greek adverb *εὐθύς* ("immediately") occurs 41 times in Mark, compared with 5 times in Matthew, once in Luke, and 4 times in the rest of the NT. In the first eight chapters, *εὐθύς* is used to signal an act of moral urgency. See Freed, *The New Testament*, 126.

³⁵ Perkins, *Introduction to the Synoptic Gospels*, 133.

in the strict sense, he is guided by certain theological motives and doctrinal interests.³⁶ It was never Mark's concern to present the events of Jesus' life in a chronological and geographical order. For instance, when Mark devotes nearly 40% of his short narratives describing the last week of Jesus' life, it is not without (theological) purpose. In short, in Mark's gospel, one finds "a brief, fast-moving, action packed portrait of Jesus of Nazareth, Messiah of Israel and Son of God but also Son of Man and Suffering Servant, best read through to feel its urgency."³⁷ Jesus is always on the move, on a journey – his ministry is a journey from Galilee to Jerusalem where he meets his passion and death.³⁸ This itinerary of Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem has been created by Mark with a theological motive.

While not wanting to be exhaustive, it is worthwhile mentioning some other examples of Mark's literary style. Mark shapes his narratives in patterns of twos (doublets) or threes. Episodes are repeated, for instance, the calming of the sea (chs. 4 & 5); the multiplication of loaves for a hungry crowd (chs. 6 & 8). Each repetition is meant to enlarge or broaden their understanding. Mark loves to pattern things in three. Jesus makes three predictions of his death (chs. 8, 9 & 10). Jesus is called "the beloved son" three times in Mark's Gospel (chs. 1, 9 & 12). Jesus has three "favorite" disciples (Peter, James and John) whom he takes with him on three occasions (the raising of Jairus' daughter in ch. 5, his transfiguration in ch. 9, and his agony in the garden in ch. 14). Three women (two Marys and Salome) follow Jesus to Jerusalem (chs. 15

³⁶ Achtemeier argues that a careful study of Mark shows that the author was not concerned with historical or chronological accuracy. When Mark created his narrative, he was more concerned to solve theological than historical problems ("Gospel of Mark," 545). It is therefore right to say based on redactional studies of Mark that the author was not simply a "composer, collector, editor", but a writer who consciously shaped the tradition to fit his purpose. See Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 86.

³⁷ Dicharry, *Mark, Matthew, & Luke*, 34.

³⁸ The Markan Gospel can be structured as follows: Chs. 1-9: Ministry of Jesus in Galilee and the surrounding Gentile country; Ch. 10: Journey to Jerusalem; Chs. 11-13: Ministry in Jerusalem; Chs. 14-16: Passion, Death and Resurrection. For Mark, Galilee is the place of the eschatological revelation of God, while Jerusalem is the place of continuing hostility to Jesus.

& 16). Lastly, another feature of Mark is his employment of a literary device called ‘sandwiched narrative’, namely, the insertion of one episode into another. Examples of this style are found in the following passages: 3:22-30 in 3:21-35; 5:25-34 in 5:21-43; 6:14-29 in 6:7-30.

In sum, Mark’s gospel is written in a very simplified *Koinē* Greek, the Greek in common use during the first century C.E. and accessible to a wide audience. Being so, the gospel was meant to be heard with the ear rather than read by the eye, since the majority of people in those days were illiterate.

4. Special Interests of Mark

Mark’s gospel does not only reveal some stylistic features as shown above, but also some special interests or themes:

Identity of Jesus. Mark’s gospel was written to strengthen the Gentile Christians (most probably of Rome) suffering from persecution under Nero by portraying to them Jesus Christ, Son of God yet Suffering Servant as their model. The author seems to present Jesus as conscious of his uniqueness and allowing others to gradually become aware of it. This itinerant preacher-healer becomes conscious of his divine Sonship at his baptism, when a voice from heaven says, “You are my beloved Son” (1:11). At the Transfiguration, there came, “This is my Son, the Beloved” (9:7). Even the demons he exorcised confessed that Jesus is God’s powerful Son (1:24; 3:11; 5:7). “The crowds, the religious authorities, and even the disciples fail to comprehend Jesus’ true identity, despite the preaching and teaching he did and the miracles he performed.”³⁹ Towards the end of his earthly life, he openly declared before a Jewish council that he was indeed the Messiah, “the son of the Blessed One” (14:61-62). Finally, at the foot of

³⁹ Paul J. Achtemeier, “The Gospel According to Mark,” in *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*, ed. Paul J. Achtemeier (New York: HarperCollins, 1985), 606.

the cross, the Gentile centurion confesses, “Truly this man was God’s Son!” (15:39). The confession of the centurion is “the climax to the gradual revelation of Jesus’ uniqueness.”⁴⁰ The theological intention of Mark is here clear because “he wants Jewish and Gentile Christians to understand that Jesus’ uniqueness as Messiah and Son of God is to be comprehended not in his working of miracles, or even in his teaching, but in his suffering and death.”⁴¹ Indeed, only after his death on the cross can the human being understand Jesus as the Son of God. Only after the resurrection will the disciples finally understand Jesus against the background of his divine glory.⁴²

The Humanness of the Markan Jesus. Of the four gospel portraits of Jesus, “Mark’s is by far the one that best reveals *the human side of Jesus.*”⁴³ While Mark depicts him as God’s son, he is also depicted as a most human Lord. In Mark’s Gospel more than anywhere else in the gospels we see Jesus in all his humanness, including his human limitations in knowledge, power and goodness. He demonstrates human emotions, for instance, pity (1:41), anger (3:5), disgust (8:12), impatience (8:17-21, 33), tender love (10:16, 21), fear and depression (14:34-36). Human limitations, in terms of knowledge and power, are also attributed to Jesus in Mark’s gospel. In 2:26 Jesus is mistaken in identifying Abiathar as high priest. It was Ahimelech (1 Sam 21:1-6), and not Abiathar, who was the high priest at that time. In 6:5 Jesus says that he could not any work of power in Nazareth, except to heal some, because of their unbelief. In brief, Mark’s readers will meet that the Jesus in the Markan Gospel “is very approachable,

⁴⁰ Freed, *The New Testament*, 127.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Achtemeier, “The Gospel According to Mark,” 607.

⁴³ Philip Van Linden, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Collegeville Bible Commentary New Testament, 2; Mumbai: St Pauls, 1991), 8.

because he has experienced life as they have, with all its disappointments and its loves, with all its joy and sadness.”⁴⁴

The Gospel of the Kingdom of God. The proclamation of the Kingdom of God (ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ) belongs to the heart of Jesus’ message and ministry (Mark 1:14-15). While Jesus discloses the meaning of the Kingdom only through symbolic sayings and action, it must not be understood as referring to a place or territory or simply to ‘royal power’ as the word ‘kingdom’ tends to suggest in our common usage. “The basic meaning of the symbolic expression ‘kingdom of God’ refers to the kingly activity of God, the activity by which God exercises dominion over the people.”⁴⁵ For Jesus, the kingdom of God is a condition of living according to God’s will; it is God’s saving and liberating activity - it is the unconditional and unmerited love of the Father which liberates human beings from all that is evil and from every form of enslavement. In brief, the βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ message found in Mark is the powerful love of God which Jesus brings into human life and experience. It is both a gift and a task which demands an appropriate response. This response is what Jesus calls ‘repentance’ (1:15). While the “kingdom of God” tends to be projected into the future, it can also denote a timeless state of being.⁴⁶ Jesus calls his followers to be disciples for the Kingdom here and now.

The Gospel of the Cross. A principal emphasis of Mark is on the passion of Jesus. That is why the Markan Gospel is sometimes called “the Gospel of the Cross.”⁴⁷ We have already mentioned above that the Gospel devotes nearly 40% of its short narratives describing the last week of Jesus’ life, which is about his passion and death. This powerful Son of God and Son of

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Naickanparampil & Theckanath, *The Gospel of Mark*, 15.

⁴⁶ Sabin, “The Gospel according to Mark,” 19.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

Man is rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes; he underwent great suffering; he was put to death, and after three days rose again. From the first prediction of his passion at Caesarea Philippi (8:27-33) onwards, the evangelist emphasizes the necessity of Jesus' suffering and death. Thus, Mark affirms the place of the cross in the life of Jesus and all who belong to him. The cross is the key to understand who Jesus is. Daniel Harrington nicely states, "Without the cross, the portrayals of Jesus as wonder-worker and teacher are unbalanced and without a directing principle."⁴⁸

Radical Discipleship. Another major theme of Mark's Gospel is radical discipleship. The purpose of his gospel is not merely as a means for conveying the significance of the person and work of Jesus, but likewise to convey to his readers the meaning of true discipleship. The cross is not alien to Christian discipleship. In fact, the cross symbolizes what is most proper to the following of Jesus. A close examination of each passion prediction in chapters 8, 9, and 10 reveals to us that it follows the same structure: (a) Jesus' prediction, (b) the disciples' misunderstanding, and (c) Jesus' sayings about what is required of those who follow him.⁴⁹ This structure is Mark's conscious redaction. His intention is to convince readers that true discipleship means following Jesus by living lives of service and by sharing in his suffering. Jesus in Mark's Gospel says:

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it (8:34-35).

⁴⁸ Harrington, "The Gospel According to Mark," 597.

⁴⁹ This structure has been noted by N. Perrin, *A Modern Pilgrimage in New Testament Christology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 110-111.

Mark seems to reveal that “discipleship is not about power, self-assertion, tradition, or ritual, but about loving God with all one’s heart.”⁵⁰ The evangelist has shown that despite Jesus’ authoritative teaching and acts of power the true identity of Jesus is not properly perceived by everyone, not even by his very own disciples. The disciples’ question “who is this?” (4:41) is typical of the attitude of everyone. Thus, Mark’s gospel, being more than just information about Jesus, is trying to persuade his audience either to decide for Jesus and follow him or walk away from him. This Jesus makes tremendous claims on people’s lives; he demands radical discipleship. While the Markan Jesus is compassionate, he is also stern, serious and demanding. Young expounds:

Mark’s Jesus insists upon repentance for everyone. He orders people to sell everything they have; He expects them to leave their families; He refuses to tolerate religious hypocrisy; He denounces even His own family and criticizes His own followers. Mark’s Jesus is a hard Son of Man to follow...He appears to have standards so high that no one can attain them. Everyone seems to fail. Everyone seems to misunderstand.⁵¹

The evangelist is so open to expose the blindness of Jesus’ disciples. His disciples, as far as Mark has portrayed, were slow-witted, even blind.

It is this aspect and theme of discipleship in the Gospel of Mark that this paper shall attempt to expound on deeper grounds and in greater lengths.

⁵⁰ Young, *Extreme Discipleship*, 22.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

CHAPTER TWO
THE CHALLENGE OF DISCIPLESHIP
IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK

Introduction

It is commonly accepted in Markan scholarship that although Mark is “the good news” about Jesus, Messiah, Son of God, it adds little to the Christological reflection of literature which appeared before him (e.g., Q and the Pauline writings). What can be said to be “new” about Mark is his narrative about the disciples. Mark’s Gospel presents the earliest portrait of disciples and offers a foundation upon which Matthew and Luke could build. In a way, it can be said that Mark tells us not only who Jesus is, but also what it is to be involved with him. Hence, discipleship – that is, following Jesus – has been recognized as a central motif in the Gospel of Mark and at the heart of his spirituality.¹ Mark’s own shading of discipleship is quite different from that of the other evangelists.² At the beginning of the Gospel, the programmatic summary of 1:14-15, as scholars call it, is immediately followed by the first call narratives. This shows that in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus is surrounded by disciples from the very outset.³ It is also worthwhile to observe that every major section of Mark’s Gospel begins with a story about discipleship. Especially after Peter’s confession in Caesarea Philippi (Mark 8:27-30), the

¹ Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, “Fallible Followers: Women and Men in the Gospel of Mark,” *Semeia* 28 (1983): 29. Cited in Joel F. Williams, “Discipleship and Minor Characters in Mark’s Gospel,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153 (July-September 1996): 332-343, esp. 332. Dicharry considers discipleship as “another major emphasis in the fascinating Gospel of Mark” (*Mark, Matthew, & Luke*, 44).

² According to Fr. William Abbott, S.J., each gospel has its own nuances of what discipleship means. See his article entitled, “Discipleship in Mark: Two Unlikely Models,” *Landas: Journal of Loyola School of Theology* 13/1 (1999): 59-80, esp. 59.

³ Wolfgang Schrage, *The Ethics of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 139.

emphasis is on instructions to the disciples on how to follow Jesus. Wolfgang Schrage has rightly pointed out, “The centrality of the discipleship theme for Mark can be seen from the fact that it was probably Mark who turned the healing narrative of 10:46ff. into a discipleship narrative by adding v. 52.”⁴

This chapter looks at the relation between the purpose of the Markan Gospel and the theme of discipleship; it shall investigate the language of discipleship employed in Mark, the nature of Jesus’ call to discipleship, the positive aspects of discipleship in Mark, and his apparent negative portrayal of the disciples.⁵

1. Discipleship and the Purpose of the Gospel

In the previous chapter it was indicated that Mark wrote his Gospel sometime during or soon after the Roman-Jewish War in 66-70 C.E. – an event that brought about the destruction of Jerusalem and the burning of the Temple in 70 C.E. This tragic event traumatized Jews and Christians alike both in Palestine and overseas. It was against this background that Mark wrote his Gospel to his Christian community.⁶ One of the reasons of Mark was to reassure, encourage and instruct his readers in their faith. He made use of the disciples as his main vehicle of instruction.⁷ In the words of Fr. Philip Van Linden,

He challenges his readers to a radical trust in the risen Lord in a most provocative way by portraying Jesus’ first disciples as slow-witted, even blind....The blindness of Jesus’ disciples is one of the tragic threads of

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ It has been observed that Mark presents the disciples in a harsher manner than the other three gospels.

⁶ Larry W. Hurtado, *Mark* (New International Biblical Commentary, 2; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989), 13-14.

⁷ Amy Fallon, “Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark,” in <http://globalchristiancenter.com/bible-studies/discipleship-in-the-gospel-of-mark.html>. Accessed on 02 March 2012.

Mark's narrative. In presenting them in this way, however, Mark hopes that his Christian readers will *see* better than Jesus' first disciples did.⁸

Thus, Mark's portrayal of the disciples is serving for him a powerful educative purpose: to teach the readers about true discipleship which involves following Jesus Christ even to the cross. The disciples in the Gospel serve as examples to the readers by which to compare themselves. Abbott nicely puts it, "His [Mark] good news to a suffering, perhaps even persecuted, non-Jewish community puts discipleship in the context of addressing people's confusion and disillusionment. What is following Jesus all about?"⁹

2. Language of Discipleship in Mark

To start with, the Markan scholar, Fr. John Donahue, has this to say:

When describing those who respond to the call of Jesus and who "follow" him, Mark uses two principal terms, *hoi dōdeka*, the twelve (15 times), and *hoi mathētai*, the disciples (46 times). The action of those who became companions of Jesus is described as "following" (*akolouthein*), for which there is no nominal equivalent in the gospels, or "coming after" (*althein opisō*), both of which suggest active engagement in the task of a leader.¹⁰

The above citation identifies the key NT words associated with the theme of discipleship.

The noun μαθητής (plural: μαθηταί) comes from the infinitive μαθῆναι which means "to learn". The noun μαθητής therefore means "learner," "apprentice," "pupil." A disciple is one who learns from a good teacher or religious leader and lives according to his teachings. The noun μαθητής occurs only in the Gospels (used 233 times: Matt = 72, Mark =

⁸ Philip Van Linden, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Collegeville Bible Commentary New Testament, 2; Bandra, Mumbai: St. Paul Press, repr. 2001), 9.

⁹ Abbott, "Discipleship in Mark: Two Unlikely Models," 60.

¹⁰ John R. Donahue, S.J., *The Theology and Setting of Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark* (The 1983 Pere Marquette Theology Lecture; Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1983), 5.

46, Luke = 37, John = 78) and Acts (used 28 times).¹¹ Paul never used the word and he had no disciples.

The infinitive ἀκολουθεῖν which literally means, “to follow,” “to walk behind,” is frequently used in the NT as a specialized term for following Jesus.¹² Of the 90 occurrences of the verb ἀκολουθέω in the NT, 79 are found in Gospels, the rest in Acts (4 times), Revelation (6 times), and 1Corinthians (once).¹³ These occurrences of the verb in the Gospels refer to being a disciple of Jesus. This goes to show that “discipleship is a phenomenon which demonstrates a close association with Jesus himself.”¹⁴ In the Gospels, ἀκολουθέω is always related to Jesus as the object of following in discipleship.¹⁵ Right after the programmatic summary of Jesus’ message (Mark 1:14-15), Jesus calls the first disciples: “‘Come after (ὀπίσω) me and I will make you fishers of men.’ And immediately they left their nets and followed (ἠκολούθησαν – from ἀκολουθέω meaning “follow”, “accompany”; “be a disciple”) him”¹⁶ (NAB). Thus, the German scholar G. Schneider distinguishes two groups of statements dealing with following Jesus in the Gospels. He argues that “only in the case of the *disciples* can one speak of following (*Nachfolge*) in the truest sense; the *crowd* follows (*folgen*) Jesus on his way for a time but does not as a whole take on following as disciples.”¹⁷ Let us take some examples of the two groups in Mark’s Gospel:

¹¹ P. Nepper-Christensen, μαθητής, *EDNT* 2 (1991): 372; K. H. Rengstorf, μαθητής, *TDNT* 4 (1967; repr. 1991): 441.

¹² Hans Weder, “Disciple, Discipleship,” *ABD* 2 (1992): 207. The verb which literally means “to follow,” “to go behind someone” also bears the figurative sense of *follow as a disciple*.

¹³ G. Schneider, ἀκολουθέω, *EDNT* 1 (1990): 49.

¹⁴ Weder, *ABD* 2, 207.

¹⁵ Schneider, *EDNT* 1, 49.

¹⁶ See also Mark 2:14-15; 8:34; 10:21, 28; 15:41.

¹⁷ Schneider, *EDNT* 1, 49.

Mark 2:15 - And as he sat at dinner in Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples -- for there were many who followed him (γὰρ πολλοὶ καὶ ἠκολούθουν αὐτῷ).

Mark 3:7 - Jesus departed with his disciples to the sea, and a great multitude from Galilee followed him (καὶ πολὺ πλῆθος ἀπὸ τῆς Γαλιλαίας ἠκολούθησεν)...

In both cases ἀκολουθέω means physical following, that is, they go along behind Jesus, but, as Schneider suggests, “the disciples’ following possesses a special quality.”¹⁸ Furthermore, Schneider writes, “In the Gospels ἀκολουθέω is always related to Jesus as the object of following in discipleship.”¹⁹

In the Hellenistic world, ἀκολουθέω/ ἀκολουθεῖν could mean following in an intellectual, moral or religious sense. Following involves personal relationship to the one being followed.

As can be glimpsed from Mark 3:7-12, there are two main groups that followed Jesus: the narrowly limited circle and the great multitude. P. Netter Christensen argues that “μαθητής is seldom used for the wider circle of followers/listeners.”²⁰ The noun is usually reserved for the narrower circle around Jesus. They are the ones who would fit in a boat (e.g., Matt 14:22 par.) or a house (e.g., Mark 7:17; 9:28). It can be determined from the Gospels that the small circle around Jesus consisted of the “Twelve” (δώδεκα). Although the word “disciples” (μαθηταί) is used 233 times in the Gospels to refer to Jesus’ followers, however one should not suppose that it refers only to “the twelve.”²¹ Discipleship is not limited simply to the role of the twelve. We

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Nepper-Christensen, *EDNT* 2, 373.

²¹ The expression “twelve apostles” occurs only twice in the New Testament (Matt 10:2; Rev 21:14).

know that from among the many “disciples,” Jesus “appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles” (Mark 3:14). What is said of the Twelve probably applies to the rest of the disciples as well, that is, Jesus appointed them “to be with him” (3:14b) and in response they followed him. Both share in Jesus’ ministry. No wonder, according to Ernest Best, “the twelve and the disciples are often interchangeable terms.” However, it is wrong to assume that the words “apostle” (the Greek ἀπόστολος is from the verb ἀπόσπελλειν, “to send out”) and “disciple” (μαθητής) have the same meaning in the New Testament.²² An apostle is one who is sent out to represent the teacher to proclaim the message. But before one can do so, he has to be trained first as a “disciple” (that is, learning from the teacher).

The provenance of the Markan Jesus’ emphasis on discipleship is probably found in Judaism. This is what Schrage has to say, “Most writers describe discipleship at least in part after the analogy of the relationship between teacher and disciple in Judaism.”²³ In the Old Testament, “following” someone is an expression of subordination, as when soldiers follow the king (Judges 9:49) or Elisha becoming Elijah’s disciple or student (1 Kings 19:21).²⁴ In Rabbinic Judaism “this ‘following’ refers primarily to the way students of the Torah ‘follow’ the teacher of the law at a respectful distance, walking behind him as his ‘disciples’ when he goes out or goes on a journey.”²⁵ Thus, Jewish rabbis had disciples or pupils “whom they instructed in the Scripture and in the traditions of the fathers.”²⁶ John the Baptist himself had disciples (Mark 2:18; 6:29). Even Jesus is addressed by Judas as “rabbi” (Mark 14:55). Because Jesus called to

²² See Felix Just, S.J., “Disciples and Apostles in the New Testament,” in <http://catholic-resources.org/Bible/Disciples.htm>. Accessed on 12 March 2012.

²³ Schrage, *The Ethics of the New Testament*, 46.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Nepper-Christensen, *EDNT* 2, 372.

himself disciples (or learners, pupils), he is called διδάσκαλος (“teacher”) in Matthew’s Gospel (8:19; 12:38). Matthew further defines the proper relationship between teachers and disciples: Οὐκ ἔστιν μαθητῆς ὑπὲρ τὸν διδάσκαλον οὐδὲ δοῦλος ὑπὲρ τὸν κύριον αὐτοῦ (A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a servant above his master; 10:24).

3. Nature of Jesus’ Call to Discipleship

It is worthwhile to notice that the first act of Jesus after summoning people to “conversion and faith” in Mark 1:14-15 is calling of disciples. Two important passages, namely 1:16-20 and 3:13-19, concern the calling of the Twelve, persons closely associated with Jesus and his mission. Discipleship is also the underlying theme of the entire section, Mark 8:31 – 10:45. What then are the distinctive characteristics of the call to discipleship in Mark’s Gospel?

Jesus takes the initiative. While there may have been instances in which a person comes to Jesus and declares his wish to follow him and become his μαθητής, in most cases Jesus presumably took the initiative and called people to follow him.²⁷ In the calling of the first disciples in Mark’s Gospel, the initiative comes entirely from Jesus’ authoritative summon and assurance: “Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men” (1:17). Schrage nicely describes it: “It is he [Jesus] who appoints the Twelve, he who sends them forth, he who grants authority and imposes duties.”²⁸ Thus, the manner in which Jesus took disciples and the way in which disciples commit themselves to Jesus is fundamentally different from what we usually find among Jewish rabbis. In those, the rabbinic student would volunteer to follow a certain rabbi after inspection of available rabbis. The pupils when accepted by a rabbi become disciples after a short time of training.

²⁷ Rengstorf, *TDNT* 4, 444; Nepper-Christensen, *EDNT* 2, 373.

²⁸ Schrage, *The Ethics of the New Testament*, 139.

Jesus' call demands immediate response. After Jesus called the first disciples Simon and his brother Andrew who were casting a net into the sea, their response was: “And immediately (εὐθύς) they left their nets and followed (ἀκολουθέω) him (Mark 1:16-18). The Greek temporal adverb εὐθύς (“immediately”), which appears over forty times in the Mark’s Gospel, is one of Mark’s favorite words. In the words of W. Pöhlmann, “In Mark εὐθύς is an important compositional element of the narrative.”²⁹ When Jesus told Levi, son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, “Follow me.” His quick response was, “And he got up and followed him” (Mark 2:16) without delay and without hesitation. David Young nicely explains this aspect of discipleship:

In Mark’s Gospel discipleship comes not after lengthy negotiation and proof but immediacy, when good hearts meet God’s reign face to face. For Mark, the good news should strike us with immediacy, with a directness that corners us, takes away our breath, and forces us to make a radical decision.³⁰

Jesus' disciples come from all walks of life. Those called by Jesus are engaged in ordinary work. They were small-time fishermen along the Sea of Galilee. But his circle of disciples is not a closed group restricted to twelve males. There were even women in the circle of Jesus’ followers (which is unthinkable among the Jewish rabbis). Jesus, unlike the rabbis of his time, never hesitated to have social intercourse with anyone willing to listen, especially the marginalized in the society: sinners, harlots, lepers, paralytics, and tax collectors. He invited them all to the Reign of God.

²⁹ W. Pöhlmann, εὐθύς, *EDNT* 2 (1991): 78.

³⁰ David M. Young, *Extreme Discipleship: Following Jesus from the Gospel of Mark* (Montgomery, AL: E-Book Time, 2007), 38.

Jesus' discipleship demands radical detachment from comfort zones. The discipleship into which Jesus summons persons demands a break with custom and piety, with law and even family. "Disciples had to break with their previous manner of existence, e.g., give up their occupations."³¹ They have to abandon their families. When the rich man asked Jesus how he could inherit eternal life, Jesus told him to faithfully keep the commandments. The rich man claimed that he had kept all these commandments from youth and wonder what else was lacking. Jesus replied: "You lack one thing: go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow (ἀκολουθεῖω) me" (Mark 10:21). When the rich man heard this, he was shocked and went away lonely for he could not detach from his wealth. The one desiring to follow Jesus and be his disciples should hate family members and be prepared for crucifixion. It is the readiness for martyrdom as a condition for discipleship which clearly distinguishes the disciple of Jesus from other "disciples/students."³² In brief, the disciples called by Jesus must have no higher priority, whether that be family, job, wealth, or life itself. Following Jesus entails the loss of security. Moreover, they must expect to share the fate of the prophets and Jesus.

Discipleship is shaped by Jesus himself. The Markan gospel develops gradually. In the first stage (chapters 1-8), the readers are drawn into a relationship with the powerful healer and itinerant preacher, Jesus of Nazareth, who went around the regions of Galilee proclaiming the Reign of God through healing and teaching. Yet, as seen in the confused and varying responses when Jesus asked the disciples, "Who do people say that I am?", Jesus' true identity seems to be misunderstood by the people, even by his very own disciples. According to Schrage, Peter's

³¹ Nepper-Christensen, *EDNT* 2, 373.

³² Schneider, *EDNT* 1, 50.

confession (8:27-30) is the crucial turning point in the Markan Gospel.³³ Thus, from this moment on, that is, from chapters 9 onwards, “the emphasis is on instructions to the disciples that have following Jesus as their theme.”³⁴ In this stage, it becomes clearer that the way of Christ is also the way of the disciple. Already seen in Mark 8:34, Jesus says: “If any want to become my followers (ὀπίσω μου ἀκολουθεῖν), let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me (ἀκολουθεῖτω μοι). For Mark, “the cross is the key to understanding who Jesus is, and sums up the underlying meaning of what proclaiming God’s Rule involves.”³⁵ The Christ that Jesus is projecting is not the same as what his disciples expect. The Christ that Jesus wishes them to know is one who is rejected, who suffers, who is maltreated, and who dies. This Christ does not offer an earthly kingdom and he does not promise earthly gain for his disciples. The idea of discipleship that Jesus wishes his followers to be shaped is one of selfless service (“For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many” – Mark 10:45). Jesus’ discipleship demands the giving up of everything to follow him, even carrying crosses, suffering, and being willing to die.³⁶ Nepper-Christensen says,

To be μαθητής and thus to follow Jesus meant radical self-denial. The μαθητής had to “take up his cross” (Matt 16:24-25 par.; cf. Matt 10:38 par.), and thus a fellowship of destiny with Jesus existed, consisting of persecution, suffering, and death (Matt 10:24-25; John 15:20; Matt 10:17-22 par.; 20:20ff. par.; 24:9 par.; John 16:2).³⁷

³³ Schrage, *The Ethics of the New Testament*, 140.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Abbott, “Discipleship in Mark: Two Unlikely Models,” 60.

³⁶ Young, *Extreme Discipleship*, 154.

³⁷ Nepper-Christensen, *EDNT 2*, 373.

Or in the apt words of Schrage, “For Mark there is no following after Jesus, no discipleship, without self-denial and the cross and therefore without relationship to the crucified Jesus.”³⁸ Discipleship, then, in Mark’s gospel is affirming the place of the cross in the life of Jesus and all who belong to him. For after all, Mark wants to show in his gospel that Jesus is the authentic model of discipleship – the paradigm of faithful discipleship.³⁹

Jesus empowers the disciples with ἐξουσία. In Mark 3:14-15 it says, “And he [Jesus] appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons.” Mark 6:7 reads, “He called the twelve and began to send them two by two and gave them authority (ἐξουσία) over unclean spirits.” Despite the disciples’ defects or weaknesses Jesus entrusts them with the power to spread his message and perform signs and wonders in the towns and villages of Galilee. The disciples carry on Jesus’ own ministry. Hence, the empowered disciples share in the mission of Jesus in proclaiming the Kingdom/Rule of God consisting of preaching, exorcisms, healings, and call to repentance. Healing of the sick and the casting out of demons signify that the Kingdom/Reign of God has finally triumphed over the reign of Satan/darkness.

To sum up: Responding to the call of Jesus involves three elements: (1) leaving one’s family and occupation; (2) imitating the pattern of life of the caller, not just walking after him; and (3) engaging in the work or mission of the one who calls. “The discipleship to which Jesus calls stands finally then in the service of missionary proclamation.”⁴⁰ We have seen that there are two essential elements of the call to discipleship: “being with” Jesus and doing the things of

³⁸ Schrage, *The Ethics of the New Testament*, 140.

³⁹ See M. E. Boring, “Mark 1:1-15 and the Beginning of the Gospel,” *Semeia* 52 (1990): 43-81.

⁴⁰ Schneider, *EDNT* 1, 50.

Jesus. Discipleship is adherence to Jesus and to what he stands for, that is, the Kingdom/Rule of God. According to Schrage, “Jesus’ call to discipleship can be understood only as the basis of his unique authority to proclaim the kingdom of God”⁴¹ which takes precedence over all other earthly ties, traditions, and authorities. To put it in another way, Jesus’ call to discipleship is not just personal attachment to the person of Jesus and his authority; it is also participation in the coming of God’s kingdom, whose representative he is.

4. Positive Aspects of Discipleship in Mark

Donahue rightly affirms that “discipleship pericopes have a very important function in the literary structure of the gospel.”⁴² Every major section in the gospel begins with a discipleship pericope. In the whole Gospel, Jesus is surrounded by disciples. Let us enumerate some aspects of the positive portrayal of the disciples in Mark’s gospel.

First, Mark shows that the mission of the disciples is parallel to that of Jesus. Let us compare Mark 1:38 (and also 39) and 3:13-14. In Mark 1:38 Jesus told his apostles, “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.” Verse 39 continues, “And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.” In Mark 3:13-14 says: “He [Jesus] went up the mountain and called to him those who he wanted, and they came to him. And he appointed twelve, whom he named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons.” It is clear that what Jesus commissioned his apostles to do

⁴¹ Schrage, *The Ethics of the New Testament*, 48.

⁴² Donahue, *The Theology and Setting of Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark*, 11.

was actually his own mission. As Schrage writes, “they are to preach and teach like Jesus, to drive out demons and heal like Jesus, to receive authority like Jesus.”⁴³

Second, true to the meaning of the word μαθητής (one who learns from a teacher), the disciples are recipients of private instruction denied to outsiders. In Mark 4:10-34 Jesus privately explains to his disciples on the purpose of why he teaches in parables. He tells them, “To you has been given the secret of the Kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables.” One can also look at Mark 7:1-23, the bulk of 8:27-10:45, and chap. 13 where Jesus gives his disciples instructions.

Third, the disciples in Mark’s gospel are the privileged witnesses to the great deeds of Jesus. They witnessed a nature miracle when Jesus stilled a storm in Mark 4:35-41. To their awe and wonder, they said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and sea obey him.” In 6:45-52 they saw Jesus walking on the water and they were utterly astounded. In 9:2-9 Peter, James and John were privileged to witness the transfiguration of Jesus in the presence of Moses and Elijah. Out of the disciples’ intense fear, Peter inappropriately offered, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah” (v. 5).

Fourth, they assist Jesus in the feeding of the multitudes (Mark 6:33-44; 8:1-10) and share a final meal with Jesus (14:12-26). It is interesting to note that Jesus’ actions in 6:41 tie this meal to his last meal in 14:22.

⁴³ Schrage, *The Ethics of the New Testament*, 139.

Fifth, Jesus promises his disciples that he will go before them into Galilee (14:28) and hence on Easter morn the women who went to the tomb are instructed to tell the disciples that Jesus will see them in Galilee (16:7).

In sum, notwithstanding the flaws of the disciples in Mark's gospel, the general picture of them is positive.⁴⁴ They are the constant companions of Jesus and they are entrusted with a mission similar to that of Jesus. Because they have given up everything, Jesus even promised the disciples that they will recover more than they have given up to follow him (see Mark 10:23-31).⁴⁵ The disciples' efforts became so successful that even Herod Antipas became aware of Jesus: "...for Jesus' name had become known" (6:14).

5. The Negative Portrayal of the Disciples in Mark

Larry Hurtado has this to say: "Though all four canonical Gospels have negative features in their treatment of the Twelve, Mark's portrayal is undeniably more severe than the others."⁴⁶ Indeed, Mark is the most realistic in recounting "the disciples' weakness and incomprehension, even emphasizing the contrast between them and Jesus (especially in the passion narrative)."⁴⁷ He is never dismayed to show how Jesus' inner circle failed in discipleship and how they have

⁴⁴ This is also the over-all view of Donahue, *The Theology and Setting of Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark*, 12.

⁴⁵ Pheme Perkins, *Introduction to the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 143.

⁴⁶ Larry W. Hurtado, "Following Jesus in the Gospel of Mark – and Beyond," in Richard N. Longenecker (ed.), *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 21.

⁴⁷ Schrage, *The Ethics of the New Testament*, 139-140.

misunderstood Jesus in many stories of his teaching.⁴⁸ Not wanting to be complete, let us give some startling examples of their misunderstandings and failures:

First, after Jesus told the crowd the parable of the sower (Mark 4:1-9), he explains to the disciples privately on why he teaches in parables. Jesus asks them, “Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables?” (4:13). The Markan gospel wants to portray that “if the disciples are insiders who have been given the *secret of the kingdom*, why are they having trouble understanding this essential parable?”⁴⁹ According to Tolbert, Mark 4:13 is “the first indication of the disciples’ increasing mystification concerning Jesus.”⁵⁰

Second, in the story of the stilling of the storm in Mark 4:35-41 one finds likewise a negative reference to the Twelve. In the midst of the storm, the disciples woke up the tired Jesus who was in the stern sleeping: “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” (v. 38). This remark seems to sarcastically question Jesus’ concern for the disciples. It is tantamount to saying, “Teacher, don’t you feel responsible that we are dying and you are still sleeping there?” It is interesting to note that the people in the boat with Jesus are experienced fishermen. Matthew and Luke must have found these words rough that they polished their versions. Matthew has, “Lord, save us! We are perishing!” (Matt 8:25); while Luke’s version is, “Master, master, we are perishing!” (Luke 8:24). Hence, Jesus woke up and rebuked the wind, and calmed the sea. Jesus in turn rebuked the disciples, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” Jesus seems to differentiate between faith and fear. Fear is the lack of faith; fear is the

⁴⁸ See Nepper-Christensen, *EDNT* 2, 374.

⁴⁹ See the notes of Tolbert, “The Gospel According to Mark,” in *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible*, 1814.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

opposite of faith, for faith is trusting God that everything will work out.⁵¹ The disciples were portrayed here as still lacking in faith as they doubted Jesus' ability to deal with the crisis. Moreover, they seem not to fully know him yet because they said: "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him!" (v. 41).

Third, in the feeding of the five thousand in the wilderness in Mark 6:30-44 the disciples were engaging Jesus in a dialogue and they failed to understand his purposes. The disciples told Jesus to dismiss the multitude because it was getting late and so that they could buy something for themselves to eat. But Jesus replied, "You give them something to eat." They retorted sarcastically, "Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?" As Daniel Harrington notes, "their second statement about buying 200 denarii worth of bread is close to hostile in tone."⁵² The disciples' attitude does not give Jesus the benefit of the doubt that he can perform a miraculous action.

Fourth, Mark 6:45-52 where Jesus walks on the water is another glaring example of the hard-heartedness of the disciples. They did not recognize Jesus' true identity for they mistook him for an evil spirit and were so terrified (vv. 49-50). Jesus consoled them, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." "I am he" in the OT is applied to God. At least in Matthew's version, the moment Jesus gets into the boat the disciples confess that he is "Son of God." In Mark's version, it says, "And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened" (vv. 51b-52). The narrator here links their fear with a failure to perceive the miracle of the loaves.⁵³ In Mark, Jesus remains to be a mystery to his disciples. In Perkin's

⁵¹ Young, *Extreme Discipleship*, 93.

⁵² Harrington, "The Gospel According to Mark," *NIBC*, 610.

⁵³ Tolbert, "The Gospel According to Mark," *The New Interpreter's Study Bible*, 1821.

observation, the disciples will become even more obtuse as they come up to Jerusalem for the passion.⁵⁴

Fifth, in the pericope Mark 8:14-21 we are told that in one of their journeys the disciples forgot to bring any bread, except for one loaf. They were worried since one loaf would not suffice for thirteen people in the boat. Take note this event happened after the disciples have just picked up seven baskets of leftovers after feeding four thousand people with seven loaves. They must have been arguing and blaming each other in the boat that Jesus could hear them. Thus, Jesus exasperated with their stupidity remarked, “Watch out – beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod.” Jesus was warning them about the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and that of Herod. The disciples, however, totally misunderstood Jesus’ metaphor about the yeast and begun to worry about their lack of bread. They completely misunderstood the parabolic reference of Jesus. Jesus is teaching them on a spiritual plane, but the disciples remain on the material plane.⁵⁵ Jesus is obviously “infuriated by their incomprehension and in a series of rhetorical questions demands to know if their hearts are hardened (6:52), and if they are now ‘outsiders’.”⁵⁶

“Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ear, and fail to hear? And do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?” They said to him, “Twelve.” “And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you

⁵⁴ Perkins, *Introduction to the Synoptic Gospels*, 64.

⁵⁵ Harrington, “The Gospel According to Mark,” *NJBC*, 613

⁵⁶ Tolbert, “The Gospel According to Mark,” *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible*, 1823-1824. Their incomprehension was due to the fact that “their hearts were hardened.” According to Paul J. Achtemeier, “Since in Semitic understanding we know that the heart was the seat of intellection, this statement [“their hearts were hardened”] concerns the disciples’ inability to understand, not their inability to react emotionally” (“Gospel of Mark,” *ABD* 4 [1992]: 547).

collect?” And they said to him, “Seven.” And they said to them, “Do you not yet understand?”

Jesus seems to be grappling with their dullness and brings to their memory the miraculous deeds that they have all witnessed. Indeed, these disciples hear, but do not understand; see, but not perceive (cfr. Mark 4:11-12).

Sixth, Mark 9:33-37 reports that while Jesus and the disciples return to Capernaum, the latter were arguing along the way who among them was the greatest. It must have been irksome for Jesus observing their senseless demeanor. Thus, upon arrival in the house, Jesus picked up their issue and declared: “If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last and the servant of all” (v. 35). To drive the point, Jesus takes a little child in his arms and says, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me” (v. 37). By doing this, Jesus is reversing the honor-driven society of his time “where fame and greatness were often judged by whose company one kept”⁵⁷ and thus to welcome children who were accorded a low status would bring no honor. Yet, Jesus wants to say that by welcoming the powerless actually welcomes the most powerful, i.e., the one who sent him. Indeed, disciples must learn to be last and be servant of all.

Seventh, when the disciples ask Jesus why they could not exorcise the epileptic boy, Jesus replies, “this kind can come out only through prayer” (Mark 9:29). Some ancient manuscripts of Mark’s Gospel would add “and fasting.” Jesus is here trying to explain that their inability to drive out the evil spirit is the result of their lack of faith and prayer. It would seem from this pericope that prayer was not a high priority for the disciples. Jesus wants to encourage his disciples to pray with confidence (Mark 11:24) and even taught them how to pray (Mark 11:25).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 1827.

As Donahue explains “The disciple is to pray to God with a faith which believed that God will bring about what is sought.”⁵⁸ A disciple of Jesus ought to be a man of prayer as Jesus was.

Eighth, one finds in Mark’s gospel the increasingly negative depiction of Jesus’ disciples as the narrative proceeds to Jesus’ impending death on the cross.” Jesus predicts that “the Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again” (Mark 9:31; see also 8:31; 10:33). Yet the disciples fail to understand what Jesus is telling them about his destiny. Jesus even “reprimands Peter sharply for opposing the divinely ordained suffering of the Messiah” (Mark 8:31-33).⁵⁹ The disciples cannot seem to comprehend what would be the outcome for the Son of God. Mark 9:32 says, “But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.” They must be thinking that if the Son of God could do signs and wonders, defeat demons, feed the hungry, still the stormy seas, how then could he suffer? Is this another example of the disciples’ hard-heartedness? It is worth to mention that the disciples even fled when Jesus was arrested (Mark 14:50) as he foretold. In short, Mark wants to show how the disciples failed to understand Jesus’ message of the cross.

By way of an excursus to the last example: It is interesting to notice that Mark has given his materials distinct arrangement. The way he arranged his materials is partly due to his own theological emphasis.⁶⁰ A very good example of this Markan systematic arrangement of material is Mark 8:27–10:52 where the evangelist is clearly making a theological point. This unit (8:27–10:52) is known for the three (3) passion predictions of Jesus. In all three predictions the disciples fail to understand Jesus’ teaching. Robert H. Stein has nicely shown it in a table:

⁵⁸ Donahue, *The Theology and Setting of Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark*, 36.

⁵⁹ Perkins, *Introduction to the Synoptic Gospels*, 139.

⁶⁰ See Robert H. Stein, *Gospels and Tradition: Studies on Redaction Criticism of the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991), 60.

<i>Passion Saying</i>	<i>Disciples Err</i>	<i>Theme of Discipleship</i>
Mark 8:31-32	Mark 8:33 (Peter errs)	Mark 8:34 – 9:1 Discipleship involves suffering like Christ.
Mark 9:30-32	Mark 9:34 (The Twelve err)	Mark 9:33-37 Discipleship involves serving like Christ.
Mark 10:32-34	Mark 10:35f (James and John err)	Mark 10:42-45 Discipleship involves serving like Christ.

The arrangement of material by Mark as shown above seeks to emphasize that discipleship involves following the Crucified One.⁶¹ Discipleship for Mark involves *imitatio Christi*. This seems to be the theological point of Mark.

To conclude: From the foregoing it can be ascertained that the disciples in Mark's gospel have failed to recognize Jesus' true identity and to have faith in him. By portraying the weaknesses of the disciples, "Mark wants to show that discipleship is not about dominating power, self-assertion, tradition, or ritual, but about loving God with all one's heart."⁶² Genuine discipleship entails firm faith in the very person of Jesus, humility, loving mutual service, and righteousness. Discipleship is a call to follow Jesus without reservations even to martyrdom. It involves serving and suffering like Jesus. But the disciples will only understand Jesus' message about himself and about what discipleship truly means until after his suffering and resurrection.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 61-62.

⁶² Young, *Extreme Discipleship*, 22.

6. Interpretation of the Negative Portrayal of Disciples

How do scholars explain the negative portrayal of the disciples in Mark's Gospel? Are there literary models and theological concerns that shaped his narrative? There are several attempts by scholars to interpret the negative portrayal of the disciples.⁶³

One, some scholars opine that Mark was influenced by Paul's view of the cross as the key event in salvation.⁶⁴ Note that Paul's genuine letters were written way ahead of Mark's gospel. The Apostle Paul maintains that "a crucified Messiah is so foreign to any human way of thinking that only faith can grasp this truth (1 Cor 1:18-25)."⁶⁵ Thus, we see in Mark the disciples struggling to comprehend Jesus' teaching about his impending passion to the point that Jesus sharply rebuked Peter saying, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things" (Mark 8:33). The Markan Jesus wants to impress on the disciples about what following a suffering Messiah really means. Moreover, the cross is likewise a possible end for all followers of Jesus.

Two, an extreme view which treats Mark's gospel as more imagination than history thinks that the failing disciples are taken from an earlier literary model. Dennis MacDonald, for instance, points to Homer's *Odyssey* as a possible literary model.⁶⁶ "For all his courage, endurance, and native wit, there is one thing Odysseus cannot do: he cannot save any of his crew.

⁶³ Donahue, *The Theology and Setting of Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark*, 24, admits the "discordant motifs of the positive and negative picture of the disciples which permeate Mark have spawned one of the vigorous and creative debates in Markan scholarship over the last decade."

⁶⁴ A scholar representative of this way of thinking is Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8* (Anchor Bible, 27; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 74-75.

⁶⁵ Perkins, *Introduction to the Synoptic Gospels*, 143.

⁶⁶ Dennis MacDonald, *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 18-19. According to him, a close reading and careful analysis show that Mark borrowed extensively from the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* and that he wanted his readers to recognize the Homeric antecedents in Mark's story of Jesus. I am of the opinion that by saying that the author of the gospel of Mark in many significant places is imitating Homer surely poses a profound challenge to current scholarship on the history of early Christianity and the historical Jesus.

They repeatedly fail to follow instructions which would have saved at least some of them,” explains MacDonald.⁶⁷ According to this author, Mark presents Jesus as a suffering hero modeled after but far superior to traditional Greek heroes. Much like Odysseus, Mark's Jesus sails the seas with uncomprehending companions, encounters opponents, and suffers many things before confronting rivals who have made his house a den of thieves. In his death and burial, Jesus emulates Hector, although unlike Hector Jesus leaves his tomb empty.

Three, a less extreme view holds that the evangelist Mark reworked the materials available to him in response to the concerns of Christians of his day. The Markan audience could certainly identify or relate with the disciples than any other of the characters in the gospel. “As the disciples’ dumbfounding obtuseness baffles the reader, the reader’s own ignorance is revealed.”⁶⁸ The struggles, slow comprehension and even lack of faith shown by the disciples are meant to encourage Christians when they are faced with persecution or other difficulties. Mark wants to say to his Christian community that individual failures are not the end for they can always find their way back to Jesus just as the disciples eventually did after the resurrection. A representative scholar of this view is Ernest Best who has argued persuasively that Mark’s depiction of their failure and inadequacies were meant to function as a pastoral example to the Markan community who had also encountered failure, rather than as a polemic.⁶⁹ Or in the

⁶⁷ Cited in Perkins, *Introduction to the Synoptic Gospels*, 143.

⁶⁸ Adam Winn, *The Purpose of Mark’s Gospel* (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe 245; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 145.

⁶⁹ Ernest Best, *Following Jesus: Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark* (JSNT Sup 4; Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1981), 136-137. According to Best, Mark does not reject the disciples but uses them as examples to teach his Roma community the true meaning of discipleship.

words of Winn, “the failed disciples of Mark’s gospel may also function to encourage the failed disciples among Mark’s readers and facilitate their reconciliation to the community.”⁷⁰

Four, another possible reading does not view Peter and the other disciples as an image of the readers’ own struggles. On the contrary, the Markan audience is to react with the same frustration that Jesus exhibits in the gospel (e.g. 8:21).⁷¹ Thus, both T. Weeden and W. Kelber, representing this view, argue that Mark portrays the disciples in a way that the reader is to reject them.⁷² The disciples represent opponents of Mark’s community, against whom Mark has constructed a polemic. The flawed disciples stand for opponents in the Markan community who are fascinated by a theology of power (*theologia gloriae*) and Mark counters it with a theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*). For Mark, “the only proper theology of discipleship is a willingness to accept fully the theology of the cross and renounce any theology of power and glory.”⁷³

In sum, whatever may have been Mark’s original intention, it seems clear that the negative portrayal of the disciples has a literary and theological function. But “rather than functioning polemically,” Winn explains, “the negative portrayal of the disciples advances Mark’s teaching on discipleship.”⁷⁴ The Markan readers ought to learn the real meaning of discipleship as they identify themselves with the weaknesses of the disciples – the same failures to which they are themselves prone. The disciples’ failures should serve as reminder that the

⁷⁰ Winn, *The Purpose of Mark’s Gospel*, 146.

⁷¹ Perkins, *Introduction to the Synoptic Gospels*, 144.

⁷² See Werner H. Kelber, *Mark’s Story of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979) and Theodore J. Weeden, *Mark – Traditions in Conflict* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971). Many scholars because of Mark’s concurrent positive portrayal of the disciples have rejected a polemical understanding of Mark’s negative portrayal of the disciples. It seems unlikely that Mark would portray his enemies in such a positive light. See Winn, *The Purpose of Mark’s Gospel*, 145; also Donahue, *The Theology and Setting of Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark*, 30.

⁷³ Donahue, *The Theology and Setting of Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark*, 25.

⁷⁴ Winn, *The Purpose of Mark’s Gospel*, 145.

Markan readers ought to become the benchmarks for being authentic disciples. The disciples' desire for power, prestige, and authority forces the Markan readers to check their own ambitions. Lastly, the message of Jesus to the disciples remains the same for the Markan community: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34). This is the real meaning of discipleship in Mark's gospel.

7. Minor Characters as Positive Models of Discipleship

It is undeniable that scholars have recognized discipleship as a central theme in the Gospel of Mark. Subsequently, "the portrayal of the disciples in Mark has often been the focus of scholarly investigation of the theme of discipleship."⁷⁵ However, according to Malbon, this is inadequate since "what Mark has to say about discipleship is ... not only to the disciples but also to other Markan characters who meet the demands of following Jesus."⁷⁶ What Malbon wants to stress is the fact that the study of discipleship in Mark's Gospel is broader than a study of disciples, particularly the Twelve. Thus, scholars have started to speak about minor characters in Mark's Gospel.⁷⁷ It has become clear then that Mark's portrayal of the disciples included a number of "minor characters" who followed Jesus and who lived in accord with his teaching. And Mark as an evangelist has properly incorporated these minor characters in the plot of his narrative and characterization. These individuals are neither disciples nor opponents of Jesus, but rather people who are drawn from the crowd who are apparently insignificant and only briefly appearing in the narratives. They are people, some even nameless, who live outside of

⁷⁵ Malbon, "Fallible Followers: Women and Men in the Gospel of Mark," 29.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁷⁷ An important scholar who has made studies on minor characters is Joel F. William whose doctoral dissertation has been published as *Other Follower of Jesus: Minor Characters a Major Figures in Mark's Gospel* (JSNT Supplement Series 102; Sheffield: JSOT, 1994).

normal existence in first-century Palestine avoided by the community because of their illness, their impurity, their gender and their economic standing. The world sees them as unimportant. Though seemingly marginalized, in Mark's gospel they are the ones to whom we should look to discover what it truly means to be a disciple of Jesus. The evangelist presents them either as suppliants or as those who exemplify a proper response to Jesus.⁷⁸ In Mark these "minor characters" are presented as models of how to live and how not to live. Their stories often express the ideals of what it means to follow Jesus. While the Twelve, the major figures, do not seem to understand, the insignificant "minor characters" are often the most faithful, believing and comprehending far more than the disciples do. Not wanting to have a full-blown treatment of "minor characters" in this paper, allow me to simply highlight two edifying examples⁷⁹:

7.1. The Healing of Blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46-52)

Bartimaeus is both blind and beggar. His debilitating situation makes him rely on the generosity of people who would throw a coin or two to his cloak for subsistence. When he hears the news that Jesus is passing by the streets of Jericho where he is sitting, Bartimaeus for Jesus' mercy and attention. "He seizes the opportunity and utters a remarkable confession of faith which no one has yet dared to declare, namely that Jesus is the 'Son of David,' the one who fulfills the promises for a royal, messianic figure from the family of King David (2 Sam 7:12-

⁷⁸ Idem, "Discipleship and Minor Characters in Mark's Gospel," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153 (July-September, 1996): 332-343, esp. 336.

⁷⁹ Other minor characters praised for their faith and are treated positively include: the paralytic friends (2:1-5), the Gerasene demoniac (5:19-20), the woman with the hemorrhage (5:24-34), the Syrophenician woman (7:24-30), the scribe (12:34), the woman with the ointment (14:3-9), women disciples at the crucifixion (15:40-41), and Joseph of Arimathea (15:43).

16).”⁸⁰ Even if the crowd is ordering him to keep his mouth shut, he cries out even louder, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” He does not allow his faith to be drowned by those who are trying to silence him. When finally summoned by Jesus to come to him, without dillydallying he threw off his cloak, sprang up and came to Jesus. The gesture of throwing off his cloak is significant here because now that Jesus calls him he is ready to detach himself from that object which sustains his everyday existence. Thus, when asked by Jesus, “What do you want me to do for you?”, Bartimaeus replied, “My teacher, let me see again.” Jesus grants his sincere request: “Go; your faith has made you well.” Mark surely wants to alert his readers “to compare blind Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus, with the disciples, especially with James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who have just demonstrated a certain ‘blindness’ to the necessity and significance of Jesus’ suffering and death.”⁸¹ Instead of going as commanded by Jesus, Bartimaeus did not leave but “followed him [Jesus] on the way.” Mark wants to present the story of this minor character, Bartimaeus, as exemplifying the perfect disciple or follower of Jesus, one who has faith, not fear.⁸²

7.2. The Poor Widow (Mark 12:41-44)

While Jesus with his disciples was teaching in the Temple, he sat down opposite the treasury and began to observe how the crowd put their monetary contributions into the treasury. The treasury contained the receptacles for collecting the contributions used to operate the temple cult. The Jews perceived giving money to the temple treasury as an act of devotion to God. Jesus witnessed how the rich people gave out of their surplus wealth. But his attention was

⁸⁰ John Paul Heil, *The Gospel of Mark As A Model for Action: A Reader-Response Commentary* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992), 217. This is the first time Jesus is called with the title “Son of David” in Mark’s gospel.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 216-217.

⁸² See the notes of Tolbert, “The Gospel According to Mark,” in *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible*, 1830.

caught by that poor widow, who instead of saving money for her own subsistence dropped into the treasury two small coins worth a few cents. Jesus was surely touched by the widow's gesture that he summoned his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on" (vv. 43-44). What a paradoxical pronouncement from Jesus: she has put in "more" than "all" those contributing to the temple treasury.⁸³ What impressed Jesus about the poor widow – one who does not have a husband to support her and hence powerless or marginalized in Jewish society – is the fact that she did not hold back for herself what she literally needs in order to live. Mark in featuring the short narrative of this minor character wants to underline the totality of her offering. She loves God with her whole being always trusting in his benevolence. In v. 33 of the same chapter Jesus made the scribe to realize that "'to love him [God] with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself,' -- this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." The totality of the poor widow's offering serves as a concrete example for the disciples to illustrate the total and complete commitment to God. It "illustrates the radically trusting faith in God's power that Jesus had earlier urged his disciples to have (11:22-24)."⁸⁴ Hence, the Markan Jesus points to this poor widow as a model of faithfulness and sacrificial giving, a model of discipleship.

From these two examples of "minor characters" (and there are many more!), Mark seems to be reminding his community that the genuine Christian qualities are to be found in the "simple faithful." Mark appears to be using these "minor characters" ("little people") as foils to the

⁸³ Heil, *The Gospel of Mark As A Model for Action*, 253-254.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 255.

disciples, the Twelve, even to the authorities, and as parallels to Jesus. These “minor characters” measure up to Jesus’ standards – especially as they exemplify the values of faith, humble service, and spiritual freedom or detachment. These are the values embodied by the blind Bartimaeus and the poor widow. These are the values of the reign/rule of God. In short, any enlightened reading of Mark’s gospel must acknowledge the role and contribution of its “minor characters”.

Conclusion

Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark means following Jesus, “with no rival, no distraction, and no competition for the allegiance of his disciples.”⁸⁵ Jesus is ultimately, then, presented as the model or paradigm of discipleship; he is both the basis for and the pattern of discipleship. To be a disciple therefore is to learn from Jesus; it is a response to and involvement in what Jesus stands for. In Mark’s gospel, the teaching on discipleship is closely identified with Jesus’ death and resurrection. Jesus teaches us that discipleship must follow the way of the cross (Mark 9:5, 7). If discipleship is identification with Jesus, what key components are needed to enable us to identify with the dying and rising of Jesus. From the very life of Jesus, the failures of the disciples, and the virtues of the minor characters, three qualities of discipleship can be identified: faith, spiritual freedom or detachment, a spirit of humble service.

Faith is at the heart of many pericopes in Mark. In the narrative of the healing of the spirit-possessed boy (9:14-29), Jesus complains about the dullness of the “faithless generation” he is dealing with. To the father of the boy, Jesus says, “All things can be done for the one who believes.” In the healing of the blind Bartimaeus, Jesus says to him: “Go; your faith has made you well” (10:52). Passing by the fig tree cursed by Jesus and had become withered, Jesus says

⁸⁵ Hurtado, “Following Jesus in the Gospel of Mark – and Beyond,” 25.

to the disciple, “Have faith in God. Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you” (11:22-23). Abbott explains, “Faith is what disciples need if they are to do what Jesus does.”⁸⁶ Jesus has totally surrendered his confidence to his Father. So, too, must all who wish to follow him.

Inner freedom, the spirit of not being held back by anything, so that one can stay close to Jesus is the second quality of disciples. The best example is the story of the man whose riches stand in the way of his access to the kingdom of God (10:17-31). The rich man claims that he is a good person, and Jesus loves him and invites to “come, follow me” (10:21). But following Jesus entails detachment from riches. He goes away sad, concerned about his wealth. He exchanges possession to the loving call of Jesus. The poor widow gives everything that she has, all she has to live on to the Temple treasury rendering her totally free to serve God (12:44). Again, Abbott aptly comments, “To be a disciple means that one’s heart must be untrammelled by whatever renders it unfree to focus on the only one who matters.”⁸⁷ It is Jesus, not one’s material, social, emotional supports, who must determine the life of a disciple.

The third quality of disciples is a *spirit of humble service*, the absence of self-seeking. A disciple of Jesus serves in humility, not wanting to lord it over others. This quality is missing in his disciples who are arguing for position on the road to Jerusalem. It seems the disciples have mistaken desires to be great, influential, and wealthy. Jesus corrects their pretensions to greatness by challenging them to be “last of all and servant of all,” and this he shows by welcoming an unpretentious child (9:33-37). After Bartimaeus receives his sight, he follows

⁸⁶ Abbott, “Discipleship in Mark: Two Unlikely Models,” 69.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 70.

Jesus on the way, that is, he becomes a follower. Jesus himself has said of himself: “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (10:45).

All those aspiring to be disciples of Jesus must embody these qualities of authentic discipleship.

CHAPTER THREE
THE IMPLICATIONS OF MARKAN DISCIPLESHIP
TO CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS LIFE

It has been hammered consistently in the minds of students of the Faculty of Christian Studies taking Scripture modules that biblical interpretation always involves the interplay of three worlds: the world *behind* the text (the world of the author), the world *of* the text, and the world *before* the text (the world of the reader). The first two approaches are realized through historical and literary analyses of the biblical text. Sandra Schneiders calls this approach as “explanation” which she describes as the activity of establishing the text “in its otherness, so that it does not say what we project into it but says what it has to say.”¹ Furthermore, “explanation is the process of clarifying the meaning of the text by abolishing all the obstacles to understanding offered by the text itself.”² As far as possible, this is what this present researcher wanted to achieve in the first two chapters of this practicum paper. Chapter 1 (“A Glimpse at Mark’s Gospel”) attempts to look at the world *behind* Mark’s gospel. It views the Markan gospel as “a window, a source of information about the author, the addressees and the world in which they lived, i.e. everything that gave rise to the text.”³ Chapter 2 (“Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark”) investigates on the world *of* Mark’s gospel by focusing on the theme of discipleship. In this chapter, the meaning of discipleship in Mark’s gospel is closely studied.

¹ Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 17.

² *Ibid.*, 126.

³ Erlinda Bragado & Arnold Monera, *Kaloob: Interweavings on the Christian Story* (Manila: De La Salle University Press, 1998), 36.

Yet, every serious student of the bible knows that integral biblical interpretation is never complete until the “fusion of horizon” or the integration of the meaning of the text into the world of the reader has been accomplished.⁴ This hermeneutical moment is what Schneiders call “understanding” – “the event in which the text’s meaning comes home.”⁵ Understanding occurs in the process of appropriating the meaning of the text in our concrete, existential lives. The two major contemporary theorists of interpretation, Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer, are of the conviction that real interpretation leads towards actualization, i.e., in the mutual transformation of text and reader through application or appropriation.⁶ Contemporary readers are not just concerned about what biblical studies and its intricate studies can *inform* them (intellectually); they are equally concerned as to how the Bible as the word of God and the privileged locus of divine revelation can transform them spiritually. It is only when the text fully grasped is actualized in the lives of readers can they be personally converted. This is the concern of this present chapter: What are the implications of discipleship in Mark’s gospel to contemporary Christians living in the 21st century? In particular, as professed members of the Society of the Divine Word (in Latin *Societas Verbi Divini*, hence the abbreviation S.V.D.), how can Mark’s teaching on discipleship be relevant to us?

1. Called to participate in the mission of Jesus

In Mark’s gospel a disciple is one who has been called by Jesus. Being called by Jesus, the disciples are commissioned to proclaim the gospel (“Go into the whole world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation” –Mark 16:15) and to participate in the ministry of Jesus

⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁵ Schneiders, *Revelatory Text*, 97.

⁶ Bragado & Monera, Kaloob: Interweavings on the Christian Story, 34.

(“...by using my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes in their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover” –Mark 16:17-18). As members of the Society of the Divine Word (popularly known as Divine Word Missionaries), an international congregation of Catholic priests and brothers founded by a German priest Fr. Arnold Janssen in 1875, we are called by the Lord from different cultures and continents to labor in 76 countries across the world. The Prologue of the Constitutions of the Society of the Divine Word states, “God’s loving grace has gathered us from various peoples and continents into a religious missionary community dedicated to the Divine Word and named after him the Society of the Divine Word.” The SVD Constitutions further affirm,

As members of the Society of the Divine Word, we consider it our duty to proclaim the word of God to all, to bring new communities into being within the people of God, to foster their growth and to promote communion among them as well as with the whole church. We work first and foremost where the gospel has not yet been preached at all or only insufficiently and where the local Church is not viable on its own.⁷

This is the purpose of the SVD’s missionary service. It is primarily sharing in the mission of the Divine Word, the Incarnate Word of God. “His life is our life, his mission is our mission.”⁸ The SVD mission is thus a participation in the ministry and mission of Jesus, the

⁷ *The Constitutions of the Society of the Divine Word*, art. 102, 16. Note: the number after the article refers to the page number.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Prologue, XII,

Divine Word: “We perform our missionary service one in mind and heart with the Divine Word who offers us a living example of loving dedication to the Father and selfless service of others.”⁹

2. Called to participate in the mission of the Church

The word “mission” from the Latin verb *mittere* and from the participle *missum* means “to send” or “to be sent.” Proper therefore to mission is the idea of being sent. God so loved the world that he sent his only son Jesus, the Divine Word (John 3:16). The incarnation of Jesus is how the Father revealed his love for humankind. As Jesus fulfilled the Father’s work, he gathered to himself disciples whom he also sent to all corners of the world to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God and the Father’s liberating and unifying love: “As the Father sent me. So I send you” (John 20:21). The Holy Spirit, sent by the risen and glorified Christ, raised up the church, the new people of God as a sign of salvation for all. That same Holy Spirit “repeatedly raises up communities which place themselves at the disposal of the church to help accomplish its missionary work”¹⁰ Thus, the church indeed is missionary by nature.¹¹ Mission is the essence of the church. It was as a response to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and the needs of peoples that Father Arnold Janssen founded the SVD as a missionary community. The SVD Constitutions aptly upholds, “Missionary work, is therefore, the end and aim of our Society. All our activities, diverse though they be, are ultimately intended to help the church fulfill its missionary task.”¹² The SVD is at the service of the church. Like the disciples of

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Second Vatican Council Document *Ad Gentes* (On the Missionary Activity of the Church), Chapter I, 2: “The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature, since it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she draws her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father.” See http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html.

¹² *The Constitutions of the Society of the Divine Word*, Prologue, XII.

Jesus, the SVD missionary must be ready to leave his own country, mother tongue and cultural milieu for the task of evangelization. Of course, every baptized Christian for that matter is a missionary and is sharing in the mission of Jesus and his church. Every one is being sent to witness to Jesus and his teachings in their very own cultural milieu. Hence, every one is invited by Jesus to discipleship.

3. Called to a life of witnessing

Witnessing to the person of Jesus. Christ has called us to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth (Mark 16:15). But how do we witness to a broken and hostile contemporary world? First and foremost, our personal and community lives ought to be a living witness of the very person of Jesus. We respond to God's call of discipleship by taking the simple public vows of consecrated chastity, evangelical poverty and apostolic obedience. Through our willful acceptance of the evangelical counsels we bind ourselves to Jesus.

By professing a life of celibacy in community, we strive to form a true brotherhood where confreres feel at home, find fulfillment in their work, and develop the potentialities of their talents. We cultivate this brotherhood through prayer, sharing in the table of the Lord, personal relationships, and common missionary activities.¹³ We help and encourage one another to fuller development. We also share the joys, sorrows, hopes and problems of each other. Truly, our celibate lives anticipate and proclaim the authentic unity of all people in the Kingdom.¹⁴

¹³ *Ibid.*, 301, 50.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, art. 202-203, 38. The SVD is a community of some 6,000 priests and brothers who come from different nations and languages. The congregation is a symbol of the unity and diversity of the Church.

Inspired by the poverty of Jesus, the Word Incarnate, our profession of the vow of poverty makes us generously share our time, talents, work, and community resources at the service of our missionary tasks. Our simplicity of life makes us readily available and accessible for the work of the Kingdom of God. It teaches us how to become totally dependent on God, inwardly free, and detached from all earthly goods and honors so as to be available and open to God and others.

The vow of apostolic obedience reminds that Jesus came not to do his own will but his Father's (John 6:38). Jesus' whole life was a life of loving obedience. The SVD Constitutions state, "Jesus calls us to take his obedience to devote and bind ourselves in the Society of the Divine Word as a missionary commitment within the Church to serve the people and God and for his glory of the kingdom."¹⁵ Indeed, our vow of obedience makes us as one religious congregation, sharing in the fulfillment of the Society missionary goals. Obedience allows us to see the will of God in the decisions of our duly constituted authorities and thus makes us ready to go anywhere the Society seems fit to send us.

Witnessing to the ministry of Jesus. Our exercise of the evangelical counsels allows us witness to the ministry of Jesus. Borrowing the words of the document entitled "Disciples Called to Witness: The New Evangelization" by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (2012), "Throughout his public ministry, the Lord Jesus welcomed the stranger, healed the sick, offered forgiveness, and expressed his eagerness to give rest to the weary and burdened." Jesus ministered to all kinds of people; he made himself available to all, most especially to the poor and the marginalized. In the same token, our religious missionary calling should make us effective witnesses to all kinds of people, especially where the Gospel has yet to

¹⁵ *The Constitutions of the Society of the Divine Word*, art 215, 48.

be preached and where the local churches are still struggling to survive. We strive to witness to Jesus's ministry through active pastoral and sacramental ministry, teaching in schools, caring for the sick and the poor in hospitals, orphanages and hospices. We build Christian communities in mission territories through the education and formation of families. We devote ourselves to the education of the youth both in and out of school. We bring the message of Jesus and his Church through involvement in various social means of communication. By initiating interreligious dialogues in areas where Christianity is a minority, we learn to appreciate the religious traditions and conviction of these people. Lastly, we witness to Jesus' ministry by promoting justice and peace according to the gospel in solidarity with the poor and the oppressed.¹⁶

Witnessing through the proclamation of the Word. As an international religious missionary congregation dedicated to the Divine Word, it is our special devotion to bring the word of God to the most undeserved and remote areas of the world where the Gospel had never been preached or preached insufficiently. This is very much expressed in the prayer of our Blessed Founder, St. Arnold Janssen, "*May the darkness of sin and the night of unbelief vanish before the light of the Word and the spirit of grace, and may the heart of Jesus live in the hearts of all. Amen.*" God's Word is the light of the world that enlightens everyone. Hence, the congregation has been active in many forms of biblical apostolate in those countries where we work. Through the power of the Gospel, we hope to establish new Christian communities and foster the transformation of the whole of humanity, both individually and collectively.¹⁷

We live in a world characterized by globalization, pluralism, culture and religious change, climate change, and loss of meaning. We reach out to all peoples in prophetic dialogue,

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, art 208-209, 42.

¹⁷ XVII General Chapter of Society of the Divine Word, art 6.

seeking charity, justice and peace. We envision that the SVD mission to “every nation and people and language” (Rev 7:9) will contribute to the birth of a new society with intercultural relations reflecting the values of the Reign of God.

Witnessing through dialogue with the signs of the time. Dialogue should be understood as an attitude of solidarity, respect, and love. These are the values that ought to permeate all of our missionary activities wherever we are assigned. To be able to dialogue with the society and its people we need to be open to the signs of the times. This entails sensitivity to what is happening around us. We live in a world characterized by globalization, pluralism, culture and religious change, climate change, poverty, and loss of meaning in people’s lives. We need to insert ourselves into the actual situation of those whom we work. Just as the Divine Word became incarnate in a particular historical situation, we likewise have to share the lives of peoples in their concrete situation. Thus, the SVDs have made it a commitment to show special predilection for the poor, underprivileged, and marginalized. This is an imperative for us if we are to be true and faithful to Jesus. Wolfgang Stegemann explains that Jesus’ movement was a “movement of the poor for the poor.”¹⁸ W.E. Pilgrim notes, “Socially and religiously the tax collectors, sinners, prostitutes, beggars and various kinds of sick constituted the class of outcasts, who were the specific objects of Jesus’ ministry.”¹⁹ The poor have a privileged place in the Gospel. We recognize in Mark’s gospel Christ’s active presence in the poor and the oppressed, thus we commit ourselves in the promotion of integral human development, esp. the poor and

¹⁸ Wolfgang Stegemann, *The Gospel and the Poor*, trans. D. Elliott (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 19.

¹⁹ W.E Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor: Wealth and Poverty in Luke-Arts* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1981), 55.

oppressed.²⁰ It is noteworthy to mention that the recently concluded SVD General Chapter considers migration as a big challenge for us today. The Chapter states:

Human mobility is one of the signs of our time. In the face of migrants, we contemplate the image of Christ who said: ‘I was a stranger and you made me welcome’ (Matt 25:35). As an intercultural and international society, we observe the increasing volume of internal and external free and forced displacement of individuals and groups that is affecting the stability of families and communities. This phenomenon is found in almost all of the areas where we work and certain similarities can be found within the zones.²¹

Consequently, SVD provinces/regions/missions are asked to work on a pastoral plan to address the issue of migration.

The recent General Chapter has likewise expressed its concern about the integrity of creation and thus intends to implement programs aimed at addressing these environmental issues. Indeed, there is growing awareness about the importance of sustaining our environment. The Chapter statement runs:

As religious we are called to promote in our life and mission practices that protect the environment as God’s creation. In many parts of the world, we note that national and multinational corporations, often with the complicity of local governments, are engaged in projects that systematically destroy the environment, destabilize the ecosystem and undermine the livelihood of many.²²

As followers of the Divine Word, we proclaim the love of God, love of neighbor and even love our enemies. We work for justice and peace and for the progress of peoples. Especially, we collaborate with our JPIC (Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation) offices and VIVAT International, as well as corresponding national and international agencies. We are

²⁰ *The Constitutions of the Society of the Divine Word*, art 112, 24.

²¹ Taken from the congregational directions of the SVD’s XVII General Chapter for 2012-2018 entitled “From Every Nation, People and Language: Sharing Intercultural Life and Mission,” art. 18.

²² *Ibid.*, art. 24-25.

encouraged to design programs that foster reconciliation and inter-ethnic cooperation.²³ We are concerned about human rights and freedom of religion in communist countries such as China, Cuba, North Korea and Vietnam.

Readiness for dialogue encourages us to appreciate and respect the uniqueness and otherness of peoples. It has been a part of the SVD's long-standing tradition to work in specialized ministries among indigenous communities, ethnic minorities and multicultural parishes. Again, the XVII General Chapter of the SVD affirms, "As SVD we strive to learn, promote and help to preserve the languages and cultural identity of indigenous and ethnic communities."²⁴ In so doing, we are respecting the uniqueness and the dignity of each person and of every human community.

To conclude, what then is the meaning of Markan discipleship for us SVDs in the 21st century? For us, members of an international congregation working in more than 70 countries and sharing intercultural life and mission, discipleship is participating in and actualizing the mission of Jesus. Our mission is a *missio Dei*. It is *opus Dei*. His mission is our mission. We, however, fully realize that our participation in God's mission requires a deep discernment of how God is at work in the world today. Thus, it is imperative that we scrutinize the "signs of the time" and see the hand of God working through world events. The meaning and message of discipleship in Mark's gospel has helped me to better understand my religious calling to the Society of the Divine Word.

²³ XVII General Chapter of Congregational Directions Society of the Divine Word, art 20-21.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, art. 16.

CONCLUSION

Our study of discipleship in the Gospel according to Mark has brought us to the realization that it is indeed an underlying theme in the whole gospel. As the commentator Dicharry has rightly said, the evangelist has an “uncompromising description of discipleship.”¹ Written at a time of persecution, the Markan Christian community needed to be encouraged in their faith. The evangelist thought of discipleship as an effective tool to hammer his point. He presents Jesus as the paradigm of discipleship; Jesus is both the basis for and the pattern of discipleship. We have seen basically from Mark’s gospel that a disciple is one who freely chooses to follow the Lord, to be with him, and to accept a mission. It involves a total way of life; it is a response to and involvement in what Jesus stands for. In Mark’s gospel, following Jesus is not a ticket to glory or exaltation, but rather a path to suffering, humiliation and pain. In short, Mark emphasizes the intimate connection between suffering and discipleship: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34). This is Mark’s true meaning of radical discipleship. And Mark is so realistic in his portrayal of disciples, especially their weaknesses. As Hurtado observes, “Mark’s portrayal is undeniably more severe than the others.”²

The Markan gospel likewise shows what it entails to be a genuine disciple: they had to leave everything (Mark 10:28); they had to choose Jesus over their families, house, and livelihood (Mark 10:29); they had to abandon their money and wealth (Mark 10:21); they had to yield all economic security (Mark 8:20). Three qualities of discipleship come out very strongly

¹ Dicharry, *Mark, Matthew, & Luke*, 50.

² Hurtado, “Following Jesus in the Gospel of Mark – and Beyond,” 21.

from the narratives in the gospel: Discipleship necessitates faith, calls for a spirit of humble service, and requires inner freedom which means not being held back by anything so that one can stay close to Jesus (e.g. Mark 10:17ff). While Mark shows vividly how the designated disciples, particularly the Twelve, failed Jesus in many respects, the evangelist Mark presents to us minor characters in the gospel who are portrayed as positive models of discipleship. Unlike the Twelve who were characteristically blind, ambitious, filled with their own expectations of who Jesus should be, these minor characters are often depicted as the most faithful followers of Jesus. Mark seems to be telling his community that the genuine Christian qualities are to be found in the “simple, nameless faithful.”

Was the nature of Christian discipleship taught by Jesus and presented by Mark in his gospel some two millennia ago so different from what is asked of us today in the 21st century? If following Jesus to the cross is what Christian discipleship meant for the Christian community of Mark, is this what it still means today? Have the requirements to follow Jesus changed in the 21st century? These are the pertinent questions for us today who claim we are disciples of Jesus.

Jesus addresses the call to discipleship to every one. God welcomes all those who are willing to follow Jesus. He calls peoples from all races, gender and social standings. I, for my part, have responded to his call by joining the Society of the Divine Word as a religious missionary. As an SVD, we participate in and actualize the mission of Jesus. As our Constitutions nicely put it, “His life is our life, his mission is our mission.” Thus, the SVD’s mission is *missio Dei*. Our mission is to carry out Christ’s command to preach the Gospel to all nations where it has yet to be preached and where the local churches are struggling to survive. We share Christ through pastoral and sacramental ministry, education, hospital work, social means of communications, promotion of justice, peace and integrity of all creation. We believe

that to follow Jesus does not simply mean to live a good moral life, but living in intimate union with him, continuing his life and ministry in the world today, and if necessary remaining united with him even through painful suffering and death. How many of our SVD missionaries have given up their lives in many parts of the world for the sake of Christ and his gospel. Yet the mission must continue because missionary work is the end and the aim of our congregation.

Indeed, reading Mark's gospel has made me realize that his message remains as clear as when it was first proclaimed. This exercise of dissertation writing on the theme of discipleship has broadened my understanding and appreciation of my own religious missionary calling to the Society of the Divine Word.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Basic References and Working Instruments

Achtemeier, Paul J. "Gospel of Mark." *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. Vol. 4, ed. David Noel Freedman. New York: Doubleday, 1992: 541-557.

_____. "The Gospel According to Mark," *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, ed. Paul J. Achtemeier. New York: HarperCollins, 1985:605-608.

Aland, Kurt, *Synopsis of the Four Gospels: Greek-English Edition of the Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum*, 3rd edition. Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1979.

Marcus, Joel. "Mark 1-8." *Anchor Bible*, 27. New York: Doubleday, 2000.

National Council of the Churches in the USA. *New Revised Standard Version*, 1989.

Nepper-Christensen, Poul. "μαθητής." *Exegetical Dictionary New Testament*. Vol. 2, eds. Horst Balz & Gerhard Schneider. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991: 372-374.

Pöhlmann, Wolfgang. "εὐθύς." *Exegetical Dictionary New Testament*. Vol. 2, eds. Horst Balz & Gerhard Schneider. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991: 77-78.

Rengstorf, K. H. "μαθητής." *Theological Dictionary New Testament*. Vol. 4, ed. Gerhard Kittel. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967; repr. 1990: 415-461.

Schneider, Gerhard. "ἀκολουθέω." *Exegetical Dictionary New Testament*. Vol. 1, eds. Horst Balz & Gerhard Schneider. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990: 49-52.

Weder, Hans. "Disciple, Discipleship." *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. Vol. 2, ed. David Noel Freedman. New York: Doubleday, 1992: 207-210.

2. Commentaries

Brown, Raymond E. *An Introduction to the New Testament*. The Anchor Bible Reference Library. New York: Doubleday, 1997.

Freed, Edwin D. *The New Testament: A Critical Introduction*. 3rd edition. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2001.

- Harrington, Daniel J. "The Gospel According to Mark." In *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*. Student Edition, eds. Raymond E. Brown *et al.* London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1993.
- Heil, John Paul. *The Gospel of Mark as a Model for Action: A Reader-Response Commentary*. New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992.
- Hurtado, Larry W. "Mark." *New International Biblical Commentary*. Vol. 2. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989.
- Linden, Philip Van. *The Gospel According to Mark*. Collegeville Bible Commentary New Testament. Vol. 2. Mumbai: St Pauls, 1991; repr. 2001.
- Sabin, Marie Noonan. *The Gospel According to Mark*. New Collegeville Bible Commentary New Testament. Vol. 2. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006.
- Tolbert, Mary Ann. "The Gospel According to Mark." *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003: 1801-1845.

3. Articles

- Abbott, William. S.J. "Discipleship in Mark: Two Unlikely Models." *Landas: Journal of Loyola School of Theology* 13/1 (1999): 59-80.
- Boring, M. E. "Mark 1:1-15 and the Beginning of the Gospel." *Semeia* 52 (1990): 43-81.
- Malbon, Elizabeth Struthers. "Fallible Followers: Women and Men in the Gospel of Mark." *Semeia* 28 (1983): 29-48.
- Society of the Divine Word. "XVII General Chapter of Society of the Divine Word." Rome: SVD Generalate, 2012.
- Williams, Joel. F. "Discipleship and Minor Characters in Mark's Gospel." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153 (1996): 332-343.

4. Books

- Best, Ernest. *Following Jesus: Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark*. JSNT Sup 4. Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1981.
- Bragado, Erlinda & Arnold Monera, *Kaloob: Interweavings on the Christian Story*. Manila: De La Salle University Press, 1998.
- Casciaro, José Maria. *The Gospel and Acts of the Apostles*. The Navarre Bible. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000.

- Dicharry, Warren. C. M. *Mark, Matthew, & Luke*. Human Authors of the New Testament. Vol. 1. Collegeville, MN: 1990.
- Donahue, John R. *The Theology and Setting of Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark*. The 1983 Pere Marquette Theology Lecture. Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1983.
- Ehrman, Bart D. *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*. 2nd edition. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Hengel, Martin. *Studies in the Gospel of Mark*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985.
- Johnson, Luke Timothy. *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*. Revised Edition. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999.
- Kelber, Werner H. *Mark's Story of Jesus*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979.
- Kümmel, Werner Georg. *Introduction to the New Testament*. 9th Revised Edition. Trans. Howard Clark Kee. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990.
- Longenecker, Richard N. ed. *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996.
- MacDonald, Dennis R. *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000.
- Naickanparampil, Michael & Jacob Theckanath, *The Gospel of Mark*. Bible Correspondence Course Notes. Bangalore, India, n.d.
- Perkins, Theme. *Introduction to the Synoptic Gospels*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007.
- Perrin, Norman. *A Modern Pilgrimage in New Testament Christology*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974.
- Pilgrim, W.E. *Good News to the Poor: Wealth and Poverty in Luke-Acts*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1981.
- Schneiders, Sandra M. *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*. San Francisco: Harper, 1991.
- Schnelle, Udo. *The History and Theology of the New Testament Writings*. Trans. Eugene Boring. London: SCM Press Ltd, 1998.
- Schrage, Wolfgang. *The Ethics of the New Testament*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988.
- Stegemann, Wolfgang. *The Gospel and the Poor*, trans. D. Elliott. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.

Stein, Robert H. *Gospels and Tradition: Studies on Redaction Criticism of the Synoptic Gospels*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991.

SVD Generalate. *The Constitutions of the Society of the Divine Word*. Rome: SVD, 2000.

Weeden, Theodore J. *Mark – Traditions in Conflict*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971.

Winn, Adam. *The Purpose of Mark's Gospel*. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament. Vol. 2. Reihe 245. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008.

Young, David M. *Extreme Discipleship: Following Jesus from the Gospel of Mark*. Montgomery, AL: E-Book Time, 2007.

5. Websites and E-Sources

Fallon, Amy. "Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark," <http://globalchristiancenter.com/bible-studies/discipleship-in-the-gospel-of-mark.html>. Accessed on 02 March 2012.

Just, Felix S.J. "Disciples and Apostles in the New Testament." <http://catholic-resources.org/Bible/Disciples.htm>. Accessed on 12 March 2012.

Second Vatican Council Document *Ad Gentes*. (On the Missionary Activity of the Church). http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html.