

THE MAJOUR THEOLOGICAL THEMES IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK.

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Introduction

The Gospel of Mark contains many themes; among these is the major theme of the identity of Jesus, following, the theme of discipleship takes centre stage. After calling his disciples to follow him, Jesus defines what discipleship will mean to those that follow him and the demands that come with discipleship. Although Mark portrays the disciples both in the negative and positive, the essay is not going to focus on the disciples but rather on discipleship. The theme of discipleship is linked to denying of self, taking up the cross and following Jesus. Simply put, discipleship in Mark's view is connected to suffering and service. The essay will give a brief background of the Gospel of Mark then explore Mark's model of discipleship and discipleship in the contemporary world.

The Gospel of Mark

According to Achtemeier, The Gospel of Mark is believed by most scholars to be the earliest of the four New Testament Gospels. Thus, it was probably one of the sources used by the authors of the Gospels of Luke and Mathew.¹ Arguments surrounds the authorship of the Gospel of Mark but most authors have identified that early tradition point to Mark, whom they believe was a companion of Peter and that he wrote what he had heard Peter preach. Van Linden asserts that, when Mark wrote his Gospel in A.D 70, most of those who had been Jesus' first disciples were no longer present to lead the Christian community.² According to Best, Mark is writing in a post resurrection situation to Christians and perhaps also to unbelievers of his own period and in his own area which is almost certainly Rome just before or just after the fall of Jerusalem.³

Call to Discipleship

After Jesus, disciples are the most major characters in Mark's Gospel; they take centre stage for both the positive and the negative. For Mark, the disciples are those who respond to the call of Jesus. In the Gospel

of Mark, Jesus' first public ministry after calling people to repentance and faith is the call of the first disciples, these include, first, the call of Peter and his brother Andrew and James and John, the Sons of Zebedee (1:16-20); then the call of Levi (2:14); and the call of the twelve (3:13-19). While there may have been instances in which a person comes to Jesus and declares his wish to follow him, the distinctive characteristic of the call to discipleship in Mark's Gospel is that Jesus takes the initiative and calls people to follow him.⁴

Ho Ngo Lu Vien notes that Jesus' call demands immediate response as seen in the way the first disciples responded.⁵ The called ones respond without delay by leaving their regular lives and adhering to Jesus without asking questions or having second thoughts. The disciples' immediate response points to the fact that the discipleship into which Jesus calls people calls for a break from one's previous way of life, like in the case of Peter and Andrew, James and John who left their fishing occupation to follow him.

Hooker contends that the description of their immediate response to the summons of Jesus conveys vividly the authority and power he exercises. According to him, Mark not only impresses his readers with the authority of Jesus, but reminds them that they too are called to obey the same command.⁶ From the ordinary business they had been engaged in, the focus of their lives becomes Jesus. Worth noting is the fact that the disciples of Jesus also included women; the first witnesses to the resurrection of Christ were women who went on to spread the news to the other disciples.

Best points out that; Mark's Gospel is the gospel of "The Way". It is a way in which Jesus, the Lord goes and it is a way to which he calls his followers. Followers, is indeed the characteristic word which Jesus uses to men. "Follow me" is the challenge to those who would be his disciples (1:17, 20; 2:14), it is the call issued to the rich man who rejects it (10:21), of Bartimaeus it is said, he followed Jesus on the way (10:52).⁷ Best contends that; the call "come after me" is a general command which specifically links discipleship to Jesus; it is a step to fall in behind Jesus and no other, in the way in which he is going.⁸

The Demands of Discipleship

Most writers agree that in his Gospel, Mark has placed a great deal of the material he had dealing with discipleship into chapters 8-10. Here, we have a good portion of specific advice and instructions to the disciples of Jesus. Achtemeier points out that these three chapters have the first sustained indication that Jesus' fate is to be suffering. The three predictions of his passion are contained in this section (8:31; 9:30-32; 10:33-34).⁹ Best notes that, the three chapters are cast in the form of a journey to Jerusalem¹⁰ and according to Achtemeier, Jesus' determination to go to Jerusalem (10:32) ought to be enough to alert us to the fact that a particular fate awaits those who follow a suffering leader.¹¹

The third prediction contains the meaning and demands of discipleship as defined by Jesus. Best suggests that part of discipleship is acceptance of the strange idea that Jesus the Lord should die, and he points out that the disciples did not fully understand the death of Jesus and did not understand what his death meant to them. He explains that their failure is implicit since discipleship is defined as suffering and they have shown themselves unable to appreciate suffering as God's way.¹²

Achtemeier suggests that, if the prospect of suffering and death would cause one to pull back from devotion to Jesus (to be ashamed of him v 38), that person cannot become a disciple.¹³ Accordingly, Jesus commands his disciples that whoever would want to come after him must deny themselves, take up their crosses and follow him (8:34).

Discipleship and Self Denial

The first step in discipleship after responding to the call to follow Jesus according to Mark 8:34 is that of self-denial (Mk 8:34). Jesus commands his disciples that if they want to follow him, they have to deny themselves, take up the cross and follow. Self-denial means that one has to give up interests, possessions, career, and family among other things for the sake of Jesus Christ, to belong to him and be under his rule. It means spending yourself for the benefit of others; caregiving, visitations and sharing the Gospel. Denying self has an element of sacrifice and it takes commitment for one to sacrifice all for the sake of Christ. Even though Jesus knew what awaited him in Jerusalem, he did not abandon the journey because he was

committed to fulfilling his mission. In the garden of Gethsemane his plea to have the cup removed shows his fear but nevertheless he cries “Not my will but your will be done” (14:35-36) Ho Ngo Lu Vien asserts that, for Mark, there is no following after Jesus, no discipleship, without self-denial (qtd. in Schrage 140) He warns that, following Jesus is not a ticket to glory or exaltation, but rather a path of suffering and discipleship.¹⁴

Discipleship and the Cross

Wilkins asserts that, after Jesus rebuffs Peter’s attempt to impose his own way of thinking on the Messianic mission, he reveals one of the central principles of discipleship: a disciple must take up his own cross and follow Jesus.¹⁵

Similarly, Ho Ngo Lu Vien contends that, 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. He points out that the cross is the key to understanding who Jesus is.¹⁶

Wilkins explains that,

In the first century, crucifixion was a feared form of execution used effectively by the Romans as one of the strongest kinds of deterrence against insurrection or rebellion. It was a dreadful way to die and condemned victims were often forced to take up and carry their own crossbar to the scene of crucifixion (15:20). The horror of the cross will be Jesus’ tragic fate but in what must have been to the disciples a shocking shift of emphasis, he uses the cross and crucifixion as an image of discipleship. Although the image is often understood by modern Christians as bearing up some personal hardships or life’s cruel fate, the cross has a much more profound significance: one must die to his or her own will and take up his or her cross as representation of God’s will.¹⁷

Accordingly, Ho Ngo Lu Vein submits that, for Mark “the cross is a key to understanding who Jesus is, and sums up the underlying meaning of what proclaiming God’s rule involves”. He explains that the Christ that Jesus is projecting is not the same as what his disciples expect. The Christ that Jesus wishes them to know is the one who is rejected, who suffers, who is maltreated and who dies.¹⁸ In the same vein, Achitemeir points out that,

just as Jesus, the Lord of all, achieved lordship only through paradoxical paths of suffering and rejection, so those who follow him must carry that out in the same paradoxical way.¹⁹ For Ho Ngo Lu Vein, discipleship in Mark's Gospel is affirming the place of the cross in the life of Jesus and all who follow him.²⁰ Harrington contends that, "without the cross, the portrayals of Jesus as wonder-worker and teacher are unbalanced and without a direct principle". The cross symbolizes what is most proper to the following of Jesus.²¹

Discipleship and Servanthood

Servanthood is another important focal point of discipleship in the Gospel of Mark. In chapter 10:35-37 James and John wanted to know if they would sit on both sides with Jesus in glory, but when the other disciples had this they were not pleased with the brothers (10:41). Jesus responded by telling them that to be great you have to be a servant. "But it shall not be so among you, but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the son of man did come not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (10:43-45). Many can identify with the disciples in this regard; wanting to take centre stage, being in the front row, however, Jesus demonstrates, the way of the kingdom is not like that. To be a follower of Christ means you do like your Master.

Moreover, Mark portrays that true discipleship means you follow the steps of Jesus. In Philippians 2:5-7 Paul says, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or self-conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourself, not looking at your own interest but each of you to the interest of others. In your relationship with one another, have the same mindset with Jesus Who, being in very nature God, [...] rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness (Phil. 2:5-7).

Wilkins warns that Jesus did not come as a potentate who expected groveling servants to cater to his every personal whim; he came as a servant to give his life to save those who were his subjects. He describes Jesus as a unique Master, who demands an equal type of discipleship from his followers and he encourages that, servanthood is to be a primary motivation for the discipleship community.²² Best contends that the rule of

discipleship is Jesus. As Jesus was, so the disciples must be.²³

According to Wilkins, servanthood is a concept not expected by the disciples and he says that, by comprehending the essence of Jesus' ministry as servanthood, the disciples will comprehend the essence of discipleship as servanthood, including their motivation, position, ambition, expectations and example.²⁴ Ho Ngo Lu Vien contends that Christ does not offer an earthly kingdom and he does not promise earthly gain for his disciples and that the idea of discipleship that Jesus wishes his followers to be shaped is one of selfless service.²⁵

Discipleship and Mission

Tannehill points out that in 3:13 -19, Jesus selected the twelve for a special relationship and responsibility. The twelve receive their position by Jesus' own choice. This position involves being "with" Jesus in close association and sharing in the work of preaching and exorcism which Jesus himself has been doing (3:19).²⁶ After his resurrection Jesus commands his disciples to go into the whole world and preach the gospel (16:15). This shows that missionary work is at the heart of Jesus. It was his desire right from the start, to preach the good news of the kingdom of God.

Discipleship in the Contemporary world

There is no major difference between discipleship in Mark's gospel and the contemporary world. The follower of Christ is still being called to deny self, take up the cross and follow. Harrington suggests that the Markan theme of discipleship has symbolic significance not only to Jesus' first companions but also for disciples today. He points out that Mark's gospel challenges us to reassess our lifestyle and take the steps necessary to restructure our lives in accord with God's will and to follow the example of Jesus, the suffering servant and the Son of God.²⁷

The follower of Christ is still being called to take up the cross and follow Jesus and to participate in the mission of Christ. The call, "go ye therefore and preach the good news" (Mk 16:15) still applies to today's disciples as it did in the disciples of Mark. Today's disciple is still being called to a life of witnessing and witnessing may take the form of personal evangelism, ministering to the sick and needy, sharing resources through

giving and proclamation of the word among other things.

The Gospel of the Good News is being preached today more than ever, this is so because of the many resources that are available today for example, the use of technology has helped the Gospel to reach multitudes of people the world over at the click of a button. This means any Christian who is willing can share the Gospel anywhere any time. The times and environment may be different, but the demands of discipleship are still the same; come after me, deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me. Ho Ngo Lu Vien sums it up very well by submitting that, responding to the call of Jesus involves three elements; leaving one's previous way of life, imitating the life of Jesus and engaging in missionary work.²⁸

Conclusion

In conclusion, it must be noted that, although times and circumstances have changed, the demands of discipleship just as it was in the days of the apostles in Mark's gospel so it is today. Jesus is still calling men and women who are willing to follow him, men and women who have courage to forsake the luxuries of this world for the sake of Christ. Discipleship demands that one chooses Jesus over everything else including resources, time, interests and even family. Ho Ngo Lu Vien contends that; Jesus is both the basis for and the pattern of discipleship and that it is a response to and what Jesus stands for.²⁹ As the unique Master of his disciples, Jesus provides the only true paradigm of our discipleship.³⁰

¹ Achitmeir, J. Paul, Mark. *Proclamation Commentaries: The New Testament Witnesses for preaching*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Fortress Press, 1975. P. 605.

² Van Linden, Philip. *The gospel according to Mark: Colledgeville Bible Commentary*. Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1983. P. 25

³ Best, Ernest. *Disciples and Discipleship: Studies in the Gospel According to Mark*. Edinburgh: T. T. Clark Ltd., 1986. P. 2

⁴ Ho Ngo Lu Vien, James. *Discipleship in Mark's Gospel and its Implications to Contemporary Religious Life*. 2012. P. 24

⁵ Ho Ngo Lu Vien, James. *Discipleship in Mark's Gospel and its Implications to Contemporary Religious Life*. 2012. P. 25

⁶ Hooker, D. Morna. *The Gospel According to Mark: Black's New Testament Commentaries*. Gen.ed. Henry Chadwick. London: New York: Continuum, 1991. P. 59

⁷ Best, Ernest. P. 5

⁸ Best, Ernest. P. 8

⁹ Achitmeir, J. Paul. P. 97

- ¹⁰ Best, Ernest. P. 6
- ¹¹ Achitemeir, J. Paul. P. 97
- ¹² Best, Ernest. P. 7
- ¹³ Achitemeir, J. Paul. P. 98
- ¹⁴ Ho Ngo Lu Vien, James. P. 58
- ¹⁵ Wilkins, J. Michael. *Unique Discipleship to a Unique Master: Discipleship in the Gospel According to Mark*. Southern Baptist Journal of Theology 8:3 (2004) 50-68. P. 60
- ¹⁶ Ho Ngo Lu Vien, James. P. 16
- ¹⁷ Wilkins, J. Michael. P. 60
- ¹⁸ Ho Ngo Lu Vien, James. P. 28
- ¹⁹ Achitemeir, J. Paul. P. 98
- ²⁰ Ho Ngo Lu Vien, James. P. 28
- ²¹ Harrington, J. Daniel. *What are they saying about Mark?* New York/Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2005. P. 597
- ²² Wilkins, J. Michael. P. 63-64
- ²³ Best, Ernest. P. 8
- ²⁴ Wilkins, J. Michael. P. 63
- ²⁵ Ho Ngo Lu Vien, James. P. 28
- ²⁶ Tannehill, C. Robert. *The Interpretation of Mark: Issues in Religion and Theology* 7. London: Fortress Press and SPCK, 1985. P. 144
- ²⁷ Harrington, J. Daniel. P. 39
- ²⁸ Ho Ngo Lu Vien, James. P. 28
- ²⁹ Ho Ngo Lu Vien, James. P. 58
- ³⁰ Wilkins, J. Michael. P. 64