

Introduction to Mark

Broadly speaking, there are two Gospels that are orientated towards encouraging Christians to make disciples, and they are Matthew and Luke. When you reach the conclusion of Matthew, you are encouraged to cycle back to the preceding material in the book to learn how to make disciples. In Luke, there is also a tremendous interest in disciple-making in order to have certainty regarding the things you believe. The book of Acts then develops what it means to live as a disciple. Compared with the other Gospels, there is a great quantity of ethical teaching in Matthew and Luke. So when the pastor, priest, or teacher, is speaking on those topics, he is going to tend to stress Matthew and Luke, because they have more explicit ethical teaching about how to live out your faith.

Mark and John have far less ethical teaching. John contains a great deal of theology. Mark is Christ centered, to the exclusion of other things like the ethical life or the way to conduct oneself. Each Gospel, then, has its own way of conveying things—its own focus and special interest. In John, the focus is coming to faith and overcoming doubt (like Thomas). Mark draws the reader to meet Christ, but in a different way. What we have to do is hear each Gospel for what it is.

Some people wonder why we have four Gospels. It is just as easy, however, to wonder why we have only four Gospels. Over one hundred books have been written about the sinking of the Titanic. Thousands have been written about World War Two. An early Christian leader said, “The church has four Gospels; heresy a great many.” Excerpts, quotations, or fragments of nearly fifty different Gospels have been found. But there are only four authoritative, inspired Gospels, that give not only the events, but also interpretations of the events. Each Gospel has a different character, though. Let me show you a picture from the Book of Kells, a ninth century handmade manuscript that contains the four Gospels in Latin. Each Gospel is depicted by a different image: a human face (Matthew), an eagle (John), an ox (Luke), and a lion (Mark). The different pictures suggest the four Gospels have four different faces. The Gospel of Matthew bears the human face because Matthew depicts Jesus as the rabbi and teacher.

The Gospel of John is the eagle because John soars high above the world. Reading John is different than reading the other three Gospels. When Jesus says “you,” you feel like you are there and there is no distance between you and Jesus. An event happens, people talk about it a long time and within these conversations someone gets confused. A lot of times, John says, “Jesus said this and we did not understand it but now we know it means this...” So John is looking at it from a distance. The perspective is also from eternity, as in “In the beginning was the word and the word was God.”

Luke is the ox. You might think that would be insulting, but the ox is a very important and beneficial animal. It is strong, patient, and the bearer of burdens. Luke shows Jesus bearing the burdens of all sorts of people. It is in Luke that we have the parables of lost things: the shepherd seeking a lost sheep and then a woman seeking a lost coin. A number of times Luke seems to intentionally have a parable about a man, then one for a woman. He makes it clear that Jesus comes for men and women. He heals rich and poor, slave and free, Jew and Gentile to make it very clear. He takes pain to show Jesus interacting with every person. He bears the burden of everyone.

Mark’s Gospel is like the lion. Maybe the idea is the forcefulness of the writing and the way it covers a lot of ground and rushes forward. Mark’s Gospel has a speed to it—it rushes to the cross. Mark seems to be leaping over the territory in order to get there.

Another picture I have comes from around A.D. 1200 and this was found in Westminster Abbey. The

picture shows one Christ and a quartet of images: a human face, an eagle, a lion, and an ox. There are four Gospels, but one Jesus. There is one Christ, and one message, which is developed according to the interest of the author of each Gospel. Each is universal and each has its special interest. Each Gospel has its own destination, audience, style, pace and themes. Each is written by an apostle or a close associate. Each Gospel is coherent with the tradition of the life of Christ. Each is factual. Each is received by the universal Church—there is no dispute—no part of the church has five or seven Gospels. The Gospels were never debated, but were all instant canon. While books like Revelation, 2 Peter, and Hebrews weren't immediately recognized as canonical, there is no record of people wondering whether Matthew really belonged, or arguing the pros and cons of accepting the Gospel of John. The orthodox church did not debate this because they already knew the Gospel of Christ from the preachers and twelve apostles. The Gospels did not create the church; the church existed. It was created by faith and by the Gospels being proclaimed orally, one by one. Then the four Gospels were written years later. And the church read in the Gospels what it already knew and believed.

What is the destination, style, pace, and theme of the Gospel of Mark? Most people say the Gospel of Mark was written for the Romans. We know from church history and from 1 Peter 5:13 that Peter and Mark were in Rome. There are some Latin phrases in Mark that would suggest a Latin audience. There are explanations of Jewish customs and words like the washing of hands, the word “Abba,” and coins. Aramaic is explained. This suggests that people who were reading Mark were not near Palestine but somewhere else. So it was probably written for the Romans. People have said that the speed of Mark was attractive to Romans because it has lots of action. Jesus is a doer.

The style of Mark is graphic. In the Gospel of Mark and only Mark, we read that when Jesus was asleep in the boat in the middle of a storm, He slept on a pillow. In the transfiguration we read in Mark and Mark alone, that Jesus' clothes were whiter than any launderer could make them. We read that the 5000 sat down on green grass. If you have seen pictures of Israel then you know that green grass is worth commenting on. Not only is Mark's Gospel graphic in details like that, but it is also graphic in the way it describes people's feelings and emotions. It is in Mark and only Mark that we read that Jesus' own family wondered if He had gone insane. And the disciples' raw emotion is exhibited when they ask, “Do you not care if we drown?” It also shows Jesus' emotional life: He sighs, He is angry, He sounds frustrated. In Mark 9:19 He says to them, “How much longer must I put up with you?” You can feel His weariness. (This comforts me as a parent that it is possible to say things like that without sinning. It is not wicked to be weary with repeated disappointments.) We read how the disciples are terrified when they meet an angel. So there are strong accounts of emotion that Mark lays out for us.

Mark has his own pace. The words that appear repeatedly are “immediately” or “straight away.” The other repeated word is “and” (The Greek word is *kai*). Probably three out of four paragraphs are linked with the word *kai*. Have you ever been in the presence of somebody who is a much better talker than listener and they just keep saying, “And then...”, “And then...”. There is no break. The effect of “and, and, and,” is that Mark is hurrying the pace. Mark is rapid. One word that slows the pace down is the word “again,” which appears about fifteen times. The idea is that a lot of times things happen twice because people do not understand it the first time so maybe they will understand it the second time.

What are the main themes of Mark? First, Mark presents a unique Christology. He tells the same story as the other Gospels but he has his own way of explaining certain things, especially the issue of who Jesus is. Mark is like Matthew, Luke and John in that he presents Jesus as fully God and fully man. But there is a difference in the way Mark develops things. The difference appears already in Mark 1:1: “The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the son of God.” Mark tells you right away who Jesus is, but in

the story it is often hidden. The theme is sometimes called “The Messianic Secret,” which is the idea that nine times in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus tells people not to reveal who He is. For example, He tells His disciples to tell nothing of Peter’s confession, or about His transfiguration. People have puzzled over this. The answer is as simple as the fact that while the events were taking place, people did not have a full understanding of who He was. It was not until after Jesus died that the disciples and the church came to understand His identity. Even when people have some insight about Jesus, such as Peter’s confession of Him as the Christ, they do not have it all right. Immediately after his confession, Peter rebukes Jesus for heading toward the cross. This kind of mixed understanding was common, and Jesus did not want people to be testifying to a faulty understanding of Him.

Things begin to get painful with regard to the disciples when we have a series of double events. Here is where the word “again” shows up. The first is when the disciples have failures on water. In the first storm, the disciples are in danger of sinking and Jesus says, “Do you not have any faith?” and He rebukes them. They do not seem to understand who He is. Later there is another storm in the middle of the night and they cry out, terrified because they think He is a ghost. But He tells them, “Take courage, it is I, do not be afraid.” Then the wind calmed. They were amazed but they were supposed to know better. There are two storms at sea in Mark, and the disciples do not get the point of them at all.

There are also two feedings of large crowds in Mark, chapters 6 and 8. The feeding of 5000 starts with a large crowd following Jesus late in the day and He feels compassion. Jesus wants His disciples to feel how difficult the situation is and He says, “You give them something to eat.” The disciples say, “Eight months’ wages would not be enough. How can we spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?” Jesus asks how many loaves they have, as if to say that maybe there is enough food around. They have only five loaves and two fish, but Jesus starts to break the loaves. The miracle takes place in Jesus’ hands. He just keeps breaking and breaking the fish and bread and distributing to the masses. If I were a disciple, I would have been wondering how this would turn out. All those people were fed and baskets of food were left over. What an impressive thing! How could you ever forget if you went through that?

Later, however, another large crowd gathered. Mark even writes, “Again a great crowd gathered, and they had nothing to eat” (Mark 8:1), to remind us of the previous one. Jesus calls the disciples and says, “I have compassion on these people because they have been with me three days and have had nothing to eat. If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way.” The disciples feel that Jesus wants them to do something so they ask where in this remote place anyone can get enough bread to feed them. They did not understand that God will take care of His ministry. God will give the power, food, and deliverance in order to take care of His Messiah. They had the bread, but they did not learn. They had more bread, but they did not learn. They had a storm and another storm, but they did not learn.

There are some misunderstandings that are almost painful in Mark. Jesus says He is going to be crucified, and although Peter has just confessed Jesus to be the Christ, he says Jesus should not go to the cross. Then again in Mark 9, Jesus predicts His betrayal and death. Immediately after that, the disciples start to quarrel over who will be the greatest. In Mark 10 Jesus talks about His death explicitly again and then James and John start asking if they can have the seats to His left and right. Three times they fail to understand the cross. Twice in Mark 9 and 10 Jesus affirms and shows His love for children, in contrast to His disciples’ indifference and even annoyance.

In the Gospel of Mark, the disciples seem to be learning nothing. The best thing you can say about them is that they stay with Him. They may not understand, but at least they say they do not understand. At least they take their ignorance to Jesus instead of taking it home. That is probably the best thing they do

in the Gospel of Mark, even though it is painful in some of these cases.

Sometimes their misunderstanding is so bad that Jesus questions them about it. At one point He asks them, “Why are you talking of having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes that fail to see? Ears that fail to hear? Do not you remember when I broke the five loaves for the 5000? How many baskets full of pieces did you pick up? When I broke the seven loaves for 4000, how many baskets full of pieces did you pick up? Do you still not understand?” How would you feel if you were asked nine consecutive rhetorical questions and you could only answer one, and after the last one you were left silent?

There are some hopeful signs mixed in, though, right in the midst of this same section where the disciples fail twice to understand the storms, bread, and children. The hopeful signs are not with the disciples, however, but with others. There is the healing of a deaf mute. Think about this: this is a person who cannot hear or talk. So Jesus has a deaf mute brought to Him and the people who bring Him beg Jesus to put His hand on the man. Jesus wants to do this but He has a problem—the man cannot hear what He is going to say; he cannot take in instruction. Jesus wants to give Him theology, but the man cannot hear it. So Jesus does some strange things that take the place of speech. Mark says, “He took him aside, put His fingers in the man’s ears, then spit and touched the man’s tongue.” While that may seem repugnant to us today, what He is doing is transferring His power. When Jesus is touching the man’s ears, He is using tactile communication to tell the man to get ready. When He spits and touches the man’s tongue, He is saying that His power will be conveyed to his tongue. Then Jesus looked up to heaven with a deep sigh and said, “Be open,” and the man’s ears were open, his tongue was freed. Jesus told the man not to tell anyone, and people were amazed.

There is a second healing of a person who has a perceptual difficulty. The first man could not hear or talk; the second man cannot see. This miracle is different from any of Jesus’ other miracles. When Jesus came to Bethesda, some people brought Him a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. He took the man by the hand and led him outside, wanting to be alone with the man. Again Jesus touched and spat on the man’s eyes. In the first century this was hopeful; it was a good sign; it was encouraging. So Jesus spat in the man’s eyes and He put His hands on him and asked if he saw anything. The man said, “I see people. They look like trees walking around.” The most striking thing about this whole scene is that it is a partial healing. That is not how it is supposed to happen. Is Jesus losing His touch? It is rather that the man has seen before. At one point in his life he was able to see, then he was blind, and now he is getting partial sight. Finally Jesus put His hands on the man once more and the man’s eyes were open—his sight was restored. He saw clearly. Jesus again sent the man away and told him not to go to the village and tell people.

One thing these miracles have in common is that they take time. People are being led, there is touching, spitting, things in the ears, hand holding, sighing, talking—it takes awhile. You get the idea that transformation is happening with difficulty. The second miracle takes place in two stages. The disciples are having a perceptual problem. They do not understand. They do not see or comprehend. Interwoven with the disciples’ failure to understand, we have two stories of people being gradually healed of their incapacity to perceive, with difficulty, in stages. It is like an enacted parable. With difficulty these two men are coming to understand, just as the disciples come with great difficulty to understand. Mark’s Gospel indicates that you can only understand when you believe that Jesus is the crucified and risen Lord. You will only understand when you see Him after His death and resurrection. That is why Mark is an evangelistic Gospel. It tells you that you will not understand until you see Him crucified and risen. Until then, you will understand very dimly, at best.