

MARK



MARK

Visionary of Early Christianity

Leonard Doohan

WIPF & STOCK • Eugene, Oregon

Acknowledgements

I thank my wife Helen for her support throughout the work and especially for her help with the preparation of the index.

Scripture texts used in this work are taken from the NEW AMERICAN BIBLE, COPYRIGHT ©1970, by the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C., and used by permission of the copyright owner. All rights reserved.

Part of the chapter on discipleship was first published in No. 58 of Scripture in Church, and I express my gratitude to the editors for permission to use the material in this present work.

Wipf and Stock Publishers
199 W 8th Ave, Suite 3
Eugene, OR 97401

Mark
Visionary of early Christianity
By Doohan, Leonard
Copyright©1986 by Doohan, Leonard
ISBN 13: 978-1-5326-0661-8
Publication date 8/31/2016
Previously published by Bear & Company Publishing , 1986

For Michael and Frank

*“A friend is a friend at all times.
It is for adversity that a friend is born”
(Proverbs 17:17)*

SERIES PREFACE

This biblical theology and spirituality series is designed for personal and community enrichment. The series explores how Scripture's timeless message continues to inspire and motivate us in our contemporary lives. Scripture is the primary source of inspiration, edification, and challenge, an inspired vision of what discipleship can be, a measuring rod of authentic teachings and practices. This series' reflections on how Scripture can motivate us in the twenty-first century comprise a dialogue between the unchanging Word of God and the constantly changing situations of our times. It offers a call to new life.

The commentaries explore a biblical book's audience, purpose, key themes, understanding of church, sense of mission and ministry. The series can be used as the basis for personal study and enrichment, for parish adult education programs and Scripture study groups, for retreats, and for personal theological and spiritual renewal.

Contents

Introduction	
MARK'S CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGE	1
Chapter One	
MARK: THE AUTHOR	7
Early Traditions and Contemporary Views of Authorship	8
The unanimous conviction of early historians	8
Recent questions regarding authorship	10
The First Gospel Ever Written	12
The priority of Mark	12
Mark's sources	13
Markan material	14
Mark's Stylistic Characteristics	16
Mark's style	16
Literary techniques used by Mark	17
Studies of Mark's Gospel	19
Mark the compiler: from early times to form criticism	19
Mark the theologian: redactional studies	21
Mark the dramatist: literary criticism	22
Chapter Two	
THE WORLD OF MARKAN CHRISTIANITY	25
The Ministry of Jesus	25
Mark's outline of Jesus' ministry	25
The Galilean ministry	26
The journey to Jerusalem	28
Ministry in Jerusalem	28
A Holy Land	30
Mark's Use of Geography	30
Wilderness	36
The Sea of Galilee	37
Mountain	38
Galilee and Jerusalem	38

The World of Markan Christianity 39

The Roman Empire 40

Life in the Roman Empire 41

History in Mark 43

The historical value of Mark's gospel 43

History and faith 44

History, faith, and prophecy 45

Chapter Three

MARK'S PURPOSE

47

Mark's Interests 48

Gospel proclamation 48

Recurring themes 50

Theological clarifications 51

Compositional Features 52

Temptation stories 53

Parables 53

Secrecy motif 55

Outline of the gospel of Mark 56

Mark's Challenges to Authorities 61

Opposition to Jewish authorities 61

Rejection of Jerusalem 63

Confrontation with leaders of the Church 64

Directions for Times of Uncertainty 66

A persecuted community 66

Questions of faith 67

Spirituality for a time of uncertainty 68

Chapter Four

MARK'S PORTRAIT OF JESUS

71

The Human Jesus 72

Jesus' simple origins 72

His strong emotions 74

His need to pray 75

The Ministering Jesus 76

A ministry of revelation or secrecy? 76

Interpretations of the Messianic secret 78

The Teaching Jesus 80

"Good teacher" 80

Teaching with power and authority 82

- The Suffering Jesus 84**
 - The pain of ministry 84
 - The anguish of the last days 85
 - Abandoned in death 88

- Jesus—The Son of God 89**
 - “This is my Son, my beloved” 89
 - The Son of Man 91

Chapter Five

DISCIPLESHIP IN MARK

93

- The Nature of Discipleship 94**
 - The call of the disciples 94
 - The disciples—a puzzling aspect of the portrait 95
 - The nature of discipleship in Mark 96

Requirements for Discipleship 98

- Faith 98
- Understanding 99
- Prayer 100
- Community 101

Discipleship as Union in Suffering 102

- A life of detachment 102
- Selfless service of others 104
- Sufferings of the community 105

Discipleship in Times of Uncertainty 107

- Examples of fidelity 107
- Equality in discipleship 108
- Women 109
- Prophetical witness 110

Chapter Six

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

113

The Kingdom of God 113

- Nature of the Kingdom 113
- The inauguration of the Kingdom 115
- Discourse on the Kingdom 116

The Christian Community 118

- Disciples as a community 118
- Requirements for life in the community 119
- Sharing in the community 120

Authority in the Community 122

God's commandments and human traditions 122

Structures in the community 123

The leadership of Peter 124

A Community Under Threat 125

Crisis at hand 125

A farewell to a pilgrim people 126

A community of the end times 128

A Ministering Community 129

The mission of the Church 129

Outreach to the Gentiles 131

Ministering in Jesus' name 132

Conclusion

**SPIRITUALITY FOR A
TIME OF UNCERTAINTY**

135

Endnotes 139

Bibliography 152

Index of Subjects 159

Index of Authors 161

Index of Scriptural References 162

MARK

Introduction

MARK'S CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGE

Mark's is the kind of book that any organization would like to be without! He criticizes the accumulation of inauthentic traditions, portrays the foundation's leaders in poor light, rejects institutional interpretations of theology, and even portrays Jesus in what others consider too human a mold. Within fifteen years of the appearance of Mark's gospel, other evangelists touched up his presentation, left out some of the material that caused frustration and questions, re-established the ecclesiastical right to interpret teaching, and solidly placed Jesus and the Twelve on pedestals of devotion.

Mark is one of the most daring figures of the early Church, but at the same time he is not easily labelled. He is the first to assemble the oral traditions about Jesus, thereby showing his fidelity and devotion to the past. But he is equally forceful in challenging his own Church's accumulated traditions, especially those he does not see as authentically representative of the events of Jesus' life and ministry. He respectfully documents the authority of Church leaders, and still feels free to challenge them. He portrays Jesus as Son of God, but also as angry, impatient, and critical. There are indications that the patristic Church did not quite know how to view him. Each of the four traditional symbols of the evangelists (Rev 4:7) have been applied to Mark: lion by Jerome, calf by Athanasius, human face by Augustine, and flying eagle by Irenaeus.

It is difficult to know what to make of Mark. One point is clear: no Christian of any time can read this gospel without being challenged by it. It is blunt and shocking. Yet Mark's use of characters, his general structure, and his strategical placing of episodes to indicate interpretation show outstanding skill. Mark's gospel may appear simple, but its author is sophisticated both literarily and theologically. If we can resist filling out his text with material from Matthew and Luke, and can concentrate

exclusively on what he has to say, he will lead us along one of the most challenging journeys of human history.

Mark's work is "little short of staggering,"¹ and has proved to be "the most enduringly powerful narrative in the history of Western civilization, perhaps in the history of the world."² Using the events of Jesus' ministry to form the structure of his gospel, he swiftly draws readers into the events so that they seem to experience them firsthand. His sense of immediacy and urgency affect readers, who soon find they are personally the recipients of this good news.

Return to sources. Prior to Mark we have the writings of Paul, and oral traditions, but no synthesis or interpretation of the life and ministry of Jesus. Mark selects from many oral traditions those he considers reflect the authentic teachings of or about Jesus. For Mark, "gospel" is both the good news Jesus preached and the good news about him. Mark is the first Christian to put these traditions into writing and thereby stop the influence of disintegrating oral traditions, some of which no longer presented the original events but rather the communities' interpretations of them. Since Mark is the author of the first gospel, he is the filter through which traditions pass; he evaluates their authenticity, and stabilizes the interpretation of faith. He is a man of strong convictions, courage, and prophetic challenge, interested in both the preservation of orthodoxy and creative interpretation that can insure relevancy.

As we examine Mark's work of theological clarification, we will see that he challenges false understandings of messiahship, discipleship, Church, mission, and end times, correcting them by refocusing on the original message of Jesus and its authentic interpretations. In doing so, he confronts those institutions and authorities who ought to be custodians of the message, but in Mark's eyes have failed in their responsibility.

Mark's challenge to his readers to purify traditions and return to sources is as relevant today as in his own time. Today Christian Churches, separated from each other and polarized within, seem incapable of resolving ecumenical differences or uniting their own people. Frequently, we see Christians clinging to the now lifeless traditions of elders rather than returning to the simple call of Jesus that is directed to everyone. In the Catholic tradition, solidified Church structures, the absence of options in

ministry, the demeaning treatment of the laity, and reluctance to deal with women's issues all reflect the clutter of traditions, accumulated over centuries of political interaction. Other Christian traditions show similar problems, some of them more extreme than those of Catholicism. All would benefit from Mark's forceful reminder that human traditions, no matter how sacred we think they are, must not block the original authentic message.

A rejection of the comfort zone of religion. Some in Mark's community are seduced by the idea of a great, powerful, miracle-working Christ, who heals, exorcizes, and raises from the dead. Similarly they see their own discipleship as prolonging these manifestations of power. Mark calls them to restudy the original message of the crucified and risen Lord, to realize that there is no Jesus without the cross. Their faith in the suffering Lord is essentially a faith in the cross.

Some of Mark's community, possibly anticipating persecution, needed to understand that their following of Jesus must be motivated, not by hope of miracles (he generally kept these secret), but by willingness to suffer with him. "Mark's Gospel is an invitation to confess in the midst of human tragedy and suffering that Jesus is indeed the Son of Man, the example of how to find life by losing it."³ There is no easy way to God, like those possibly suggested by the Graeco-Roman world, but only discipleship, faith, and the cross. As Christians journey toward the promised kingdom, they must suffer present trials, thus manifesting their radical faith and hope.

Mark also insists that there are no secure and comforting channels of truth that we can unquestioningly accept. Whether we examine the Temple and its rituals, the Pharisees and their laws, the scribes and their interpretations, or the disciples and their misunderstandings—we find that they all warn us against placing our security in religious institutions of one kind or another. Genuine religion does not guarantee this kind of security.

In today's Christian Churches we see conservatives delighting again in the re-establishment of monarchical power, the rebirth of centralized authority, the dominant influence of career ecclesiastics, the increase in curial trials, the power of wealth, and a return to a fundamentalist interpretation of Church teachings. We also witness a return to the comfort of tridentine mystery, preconciliar devotions, and a facade of security in moral teachings. This yearning for comfort and security, never a sign of authentic

religious faith, would be as severely criticized by Mark today, as it was in his own time.

The courage to be free. While Mark is respectful of sources, authentic teachings, and authorities, he leaves the reader with a sense of profound individual responsibility and liberty. Some in his community, having had to break with the past, are now free of the Temple and pharisaic law; they must not cling to former ways. They are free from the overbearing pressure of Church authorities, that Mark seems to identify with James and the Jerusalem Church. They are free from Satan's hold over them, for Jesus has overthrown and bound him. They are free of their own sin, for Jesus has brought forgiveness. They are free, even though they anticipate persecution and death, for they know that losing one's life for Christ is the way to gain it. In their own religious practice, they are free from the burden of rituals and directives, for the seed of Christian life grows secretly on its own.

Mark portrays a healthy skepticism towards the restrictive dimensions of religion, for Christ has made us free. This freedom brings both joy and responsibility. The constructive role of skepticism and evangelical criticism is needed in all the Churches. While respecting those who minister in management roles, we can never be blind to their failures, their misconceptions and the temptations they experience to seek position and control. Respect for authority is necessary, but we must always be on our guard against its abuse.

In the Churches of the early eighties we see again, as we have so often seen before, Church officials who seek to control others and impose their own views on followers from all walks of life. We see appointments resulting from unquestioning loyalty to other Church administrators rather than to the gospel. We even see ecclesiastical attitudes and curial trials similar to those of which sections of the apocalyptic discourse of Mark are clearly descriptive. Mark's blunt rejection of this type of control and his sense of liberty are challenging and full of hope.

Mark's contemporary challenge. As we look to the nineties, Christianity continues to be characterized by divisions and polarization. The early enthusiasm of the late sixties has disappeared, and honest attempts at dialogue and coresponsibility have waned. We see a return to the concentration of power and

control in the hands of a few. Our division into Churches has extended to divisions within the Churches, and this polarization and hostility seem likely to increase.

We also witness a growing inflexibility in Church structures and the surfacing of an ecclesiastical totalitarianism which is basically a manifestation of weak faith in Christ's presence in all the faithful. These man-made structures should be changed; where they are not changed, they should be confronted.

Many needs of today's Christian people go unmet: the need for respect, freedom, religious experience, dialogue, and sacramental ministers. Much of today's spirituality is inadequate for the modern world, coming from elitist officials, unsure of the Christian challenges in the real world.

These problems in our Churches are not likely to decrease during the next decade, rather they will intensify. The "sorrowful gospel"⁴ is very appropriate for our sorrowful Church. Mark's call to suffer, envisioned by him as coming from forces outside the Church, is more likely to come as a result of inner tension, divisiveness, and mutual rejection. Mark's evangelical call to respect authorities, challenge them, and imitate the suffering servanthood of Jesus may indicate the major directions of the next decade's spirituality.

Mark's call to return to authentic sources, uncluttered by unacceptable traditions; his challenge away from the comfort zone of religion; and his insistence on allowing people to live as those freed by the Lord may well be the main trends of the next decade's ecclesial responsibility.

His reminder to break with the past, and to live an independent reincarnation of Jesus' call in the present, selecting from the available traditions those still relevant, may be the focus of our pastoral practice.

Mark is a genius, a prophet, and an irritant, who will always disturb our comfortable, unquestioned lives. A Christian without compromise, his message is one of the most challenging documents of world history.