

“Theology and biblical commentary at its best.”— BRYAN CHAPEL

*Explorations in Biblical Theology*

# A Theology of Mark

The Dynamic between Christology and Authentic Discipleship



Hans F. Bayer

*Robert A. Peterson, Series Editor*



Hans Bayer reads the book of Mark with the mind of a philosopher, the heart of a lover, and the humility of a disciple. His aim is to show how self-perception (both individual and corporate) and God-perception shaped by the gospel simultaneously result in reconciled relationships and radical discipleship. Here is theology and biblical commentary at its best—rooted in powerful textual insights and rigorously applied to contemporary discipleship. The insights are profound; the grace is sweet.

—**Bryan Chapell**, President and Professor of Practical Theology, Covenant Theological Seminary, St. Louis

Oh, the limitations of an endorsement blurb! I could go on and on about Hans Bayer's new book, *A Theology of Mark*. Not only is this the best book I have ever read on the theology of Mark's Gospel, it's also my new favorite on the nature and rhythms of gospel-centered discipleship. My first response after finishing the book was to thank God for Hans's informed mind and enflamed heart—for this is exactly what Professor Bayer has given us as he interacts with the person and work of Jesus and our call to authentic discipleship. His reflection on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship* is worth the price of the book alone. By all means, buy this book. It's not just a great read; it's an important read.

—**Scotty Smith**, Founding Pastor, Pastor of Preaching, Christ Community Church, Franklin, Tennessee

Hans Bayer gives us a remarkable study of the Gospel of Mark. No evangelical scholar is more aware of detailed and scholarly work on the Second Gospel than Dr. Bayer. In this volume, he displays his theological and pastoral insights into the Gospel. He deals with a number of major topics: genre, structure and purpose, thematic framework, and the person and work of Jesus. This brief work represents Dr. Bayer's decades of study and experience as a follower of Jesus. If you want to step into the theological and practical implications of the Gospel of Mark, this is the book for you. You will not be disappointed.

—**Richard L. Pratt Jr.**, President Third Millennium Ministries, Fern Park, Florida

A clear, careful, warm, detailed, reflective, humble, personal, and applicable consideration of Mark's presentation of Jesus and who we are in relation to him. Bayer's disarming gentleness enhances the pointedness of Mark's claims about Jesus and about my need to surrender to the Carpenter from Galilee. This is an encouragement toward taking up our crosses as Jesus' people, particularly amid the challenges of twenty-first-century North America and Europe. Use the book in a small group and see what happens.

—**J. Nelson Jennings**, Director of Program and Community Life, Overseas Ministries Study Center, New Haven

There is a great hunger for Christ-centered discipleship. And what better place to be instructed in such grace-centered living than at the feet of Jesus himself? *A Theology of Mark* deserves to be studied both as to its theory and even more importantly as to its practice. May it be used by many to strengthen their relationship with Christ and lead them in true biblical discipleship.

—**Paul D. Kooistra**, Coordinator of Mission to the World, Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), Atlanta

Hans Bayer's character-shaping tour through Mark's Gospel will bring each reader who longs for intimacy with a holy God to an intensely intimate and more dependent encounter with Jesus. In his insightful and compelling book, Bayer has found a way to help us listen clearly to the very words and actions of the Savior that call us into relationship with himself and lead toward magnified kingdom impact. Discipleship leaps forward not simply as a duty, but as a passionate desire of God to be near to us.

—**Benjamin K. Homan**, President, John Stott Ministries / Langham Partnership (USA)

Having already benefited enormously from his teaching on the subject and seen it deeply impact young Christian leaders in Scotland, I am thrilled to see Hans Bayer's material in print and available to a wider audience. I am confident that it will become a key resource for us in shaping our theology and practice of discipleship.

Paying close attention to the wider literary structures as well as the textual details of Mark's Gospel, Hans calls us back to a biblically and theologically rigorous understanding of discipleship patterned on Jesus' example and teaching. This book is unique in framing Jesus' call to discipleship in the context of the bigger biblical picture of redemptive history. The emphases on radical dependence, heart transformation, and the reciprocal nature of disciple-making relationships provide necessary correctives to contemporary approaches that are too often marred by individualism, a focus on activities to the neglect of the heart, and a misuse of power by leaders who are "discipling" others.

This material on discipleship in the Gospel of Mark represents the fruit of many years of deep engagement with the text as well as mature reflection on its application to the reality of living as a disciple of Jesus. Hans is a wise and godly instructor whose life matches his teaching. This book is a deep and rich repository of insight and wisdom that needs to be engaged, wrestled with, and applied by those called to lead within the body of Christ. I am convinced that as we apply the principles Hans Bayer so brilliantly draws out from Mark, we will see not only the transformation of individual disciples, but also the transformation of church and society. Hans points us back to Jesus' approach to discipleship—why would we ever seek another?

—**Mark Stirling**, Leader of the European Disciple-Making Leaders Network, Edinburgh

In customary fashion, Dr. Hans Bayer provides high-level scholarship in accessible form in his latest work. For those looking for a fresh way to love Jesus with the mind and the heart, this book provides that rich possibility. I highly recommend it.

—**Scott Sauls**, Senior Director of Community Formation, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York



# A Theology of Mark

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# A Theology of Mark

The Dynamic between Christology  
and Authentic Discipleship

Hans F. Bayer



P U B L I S H I N G  
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

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Printed in the United States of America

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Bayer, Hans F. (Hans Friedrich)

A theology of Mark : the dynamic between Christology and authentic discipleship / Hans F. Bayer.

p. cm. -- (Explorations in biblical theology)

Includes bibliographical references and indexes.

ISBN 978-1-59638-119-3 (pbk.)

1. Bible. N.T. Mark--Theology. I. Title.

BS2585.52.B39 2012

226.3'06--dc23

2011047703

To my wife, Susan,  
faithful friend and sojourner in following Christ



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# Series Introduction

BELIEVERS TODAY need high-quality literature that attracts them to good theology and builds them up in their faith. Currently, readers may find several sets of lengthy—and rather technical—books on Reformed theology, as well as some that are helpful and semipopular. *Explorations in Biblical Theology* takes a more mid-range approach, seeking to offer readers the substantial content of the more lengthy books, while striving for the readability of the semipopular books.

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*Explorations in Biblical Theology* is written for college seniors, seminarians, pastors, and thoughtful lay readers. These volumes are intended to be accessible and not obscured by excessive references to Hebrew, Greek, or theological jargon.

Each book seeks to be solidly Reformed in orientation, because the writers love the Reformed faith. The various theological themes and biblical books are treated from the perspective of biblical theology. Writers either trace doctrines through the Bible or open up the theology of the specific book they treat.

## SERIES INTRODUCTION

Writers desire not merely to dispense the Bible's good information, but also to apply that information to real needs today.

Explorations in Biblical Theology is committed to being warm and winsome, with a focus on applying God's truth to life. Authors aim to treat those with whom they disagree as they themselves would want to be treated. The motives for the rejection of error are not to fight, hurt, or wound, but to protect, help, and heal. The authors of this series will be godly, capable scholars with a commitment to Reformed theology and a burden to minister that theology clearly to God's people.

Robert A. Peterson  
Series Editor

# Acknowledgments

TO THANK SOME, but not all, of those who have been influential in the inception and maturing of the present book is a sure recipe for hurting some good friends who perhaps contributed most significantly to it. I thus wish to thank my adult children; relatives; friends; colleagues (especially “my educator,” Donald Guthrie); and UCCF/Navigator conference participants in Arbroath, Scotland; as well as my students in St. Louis, Riga, Kiev, Eger, and Goiania as a group to whom I am deeply indebted for friendship and counsel. A special mention is due to those wonderful IFES “Bible and Culture” participants at Schloss Mittersill, Austria, who came from Western, Central, and Eastern Europe, as well as all the way from Asia. All of you have shaped me and my thinking more than you can imagine. God has richly blessed me through each one of you. Thank you.

Without the generous sabbatical arrangement at Covenant Theological Seminary and the support of our wonderful staff (including our library staff), administration, colleagues, and the board of trustees, I would not have had time to write. The sabbatical afforded my wife and me use of the library and research facility at Schloss Mittersill, Austria, to accomplish much of the work on this project.

My colleague, Robert Peterson, kindly invited me to contribute this book to the series he so ably edits, *Explorations in Biblical Theology*. He supported and encouraged me in countless ways throughout the process. My teaching assistant, Elliott Pinegar, helped me with many references, and Rick Matt edited the entire book in a most competent and helpful fashion. Thank you. Marvin

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Padgett and the other team members at P&R Publishing kindly supported the project in its various stages.

My wife, Susan, has been a constant friend and companion along the adventurous road. It is a joy to dedicate this book to her. In the course of writing it and teaching some of its contents, we discovered even more common ground for the kind of team ministry that delights us both.

# Introduction

SINCERE CHRISTIANS hold helpful yet divergent ideas about discipleship. Some focus on steps that disciples must follow, some emphasize one-on-one mentoring based on the relationship of Paul and Timothy, others see the practice of spiritual disciplines as the key, while still others hold to an intellectual approach that accentuates reading and studying good books.

While all of these approaches have something to recommend them, they also share common weaknesses. They do not appear to draw their definitions of discipleship from Scripture's big picture. And although their proponents look to Jesus for salvation, they do not focus enough on his view of discipleship.

This book is an attempt to remedy this situation. Though there is value in other approaches to discipleship, our purpose here is to explore a more comprehensive approach—that of Jesus with his own disciples. Though we will be concerned with details, we will also attempt to put those details in the context of the biblical story and worldview. Consequently, many readers will be surprised—perhaps as surprised as the original band of disciples.

The twelve initial companions of Jesus, chief among them Peter, were indeed taken by surprise, as John Mark's presentation of Peter's account reveals. The account is honest, self-critical, transparent, and unadorned. The group with which Jesus works admits to disbelief and the inability to comprehend key aspects of his person and teaching. The Master is portrayed as incomprehensible and yet deeply personal, puzzling yet captivating, awesome yet the harbor of profound hope. What has been revealed about the purposes of God in the Old Testament is brought by the disciples' Master to a perplexing yet exhilarating realization. In the

wake of this realization, preconceived expectations held among Jews in first-century Palestine are shattered to make room for the unexpected yet deeply biblical appearance of “him who is to come.” The question “Who is he?” (Mark 4:41; 8:28) reverberates throughout Mark’s (and thus Peter’s) account as a leading theme. Connected with this question is Jesus’ challenging exposure of the disciples’ true need. In the end, the profound claims laid upon Mark’s readers are a consequence of the eminent stature, sacrificial commitment, and transforming power of the Master, as well as his knowledge of the human heart.

As we turn our attention from this first-century A.D. witness account to our own time, we are at once struck by the fact that we live in a fast-moving age, especially in the Western world. Modernism (ca. 1790–1960) with its man-centered rationalism has been replaced by postmodernism (ca. 1960–2010?) with its man-centered experience and self-realization. Some have already coined the term “transmodernism” to describe the philosophical and experiential milieu we are now entering.

Even if these labels are not helpful, the void left by the profound tragedies of twentieth-century fascism and communism and the recent resurgence of radical Islam have led to great disillusionment, cynicism, and animosity. In the midst of a moral and spiritual void, especially in Europe, many call for a return to a form of rationalism<sup>1</sup> as the only way out of the current impasse and the perceived threat of radical Islam.

Yet one common sentiment does seem to be pervasive: Christianity has been tested intellectually and practically over the past twenty centuries and has been found wanting, at least in the Western world (think of the “New Atheism”). Often, however, it is a mere caricature of Christianity that is being rejected, a caricature which misrepresents the truth and essence of the faith. This caricature is propagated by well-meaning and not so well-meaning people claiming to represent the faith of Christians while actually peddling their own misguided, misleading, and, at

1. We see a call for a return to a modified Kantian rationalism and ethics in, for example, Jürgen Habermas.

times, very harmful brand of “Christianity” (such as, for example, the “health-and-wealth” message).

At a time of great confusion and profound need, a fresh look at the person of Jesus, the purpose of his life on earth, and his relevance for the twenty-first century is sorely needed. To this end, we will focus on the Gospel of Mark as an early and reliable witness-report of the astounding person and transforming mission of Jesus in the context of the in-breaking, eternal rule of God.

We will relate the ancient witness account to today’s world. Before we make this connection, however, we will briefly seek to answer the following questions:

1. What is the genre of this ancient witness account (chapter 1), and how was the content of that account collected (in chapter 1 and appendix A)?
2. What formal structure, purpose, and flow of thought does the account display (chapter 2)?
3. What thematic framework serves as the backdrop for the call to follow Christ (chapter 3)?
4. Who is this Jesus in his person, mission, and power (chapter 4)?

Appendix A will take up contemporary challenges concerning the origin and formation of Mark’s Gospel account, and offer some responses to those challenges.

To proceed in this way, we neither abandon long-standing questions of historical and theological truth nor ignore pressing contemporary questions of authenticity, relevance, and significance for everyday life. We submit that both “truth questions” (chapter 1 and appendix A) and “relevance questions” (chapters 2–9) are appropriate and necessary. The Markan Gospel account has to be able to withstand scrutiny on both counts and give answers to both areas of investigation.

A fashionable and substantial wing of modern scholarship still argues that the canonical Gospel of Mark is a faith-driven

construction of the early church; such arguments must be answered (see chapter 1 and appendix A). Likewise, it is not sufficient and satisfactory to argue simply that the message of Mark is life-changing and relevant (chapters 2–9) regardless of whether it is historically true or not. If Mark is merely a creative faith-projection of the early church, its life-changing message is unsubstantiated and ultimately meaningless.

Nor will it do to readily accept the Gospel of Mark as historically true (see chapter 1 and appendix A) while being unable to awaken a modern person from a materialistic slumber or existential cynicism. Such a challenge can only be answered with the evidence of individual and communal lives lived in the transforming power of the gospel of God's grace. Only changed lives will show the contemporary viability of Jesus' unusual and counter-intuitive call to surrender self-sufficiency in exchange for following him—and thus, God (chapters 4–9).

In our central section (chapters 4–8) we will argue that at the beginning of Jesus' unique and authoritative call to discipleship lie two essential questions (chapter 5):

1. Who do you perceive yourself to be?
2. Who do you perceive God to be?

Even atheists, agnostics, and materialists must offer answers to both questions by stating, for example, the belief that God does not exist or that God is unknowable. The consequence of such statements is that such a person exists for him- or herself and that there is no absolute foundation for distinguishing good and evil. The two questions apply especially to our contemporaries who hold to some belief in a higher being or existence.

The baffling realization is that both questions are intimately interconnected: human identity and life story are either conceived of as autonomous or in relationship to a loving Creator. If they are autonomous, one is challenged to come up with definitions arising out of him- or herself, that is, for instance, by recourse

to naturalistic evolution, assuming the existence of a random universe without cause.<sup>2</sup>

If, however, identity and life story are conceived of as being in dependence upon a loving Creator, relationship with him has to be addressed in the context of human existence. In this context, new questions arise: is the relationship between God and man seriously broken (Christianity), or is it more or less intact, capable of being improved by mere spiritual disciplines and knowledge (rabbinic Judaism, Islam, and, to a degree, Confucianism, Hinduism, and Buddhism)? The interdependence of the two questions is undeniable for the atheist, agnostic, and the theist.

Jesus' initial and authoritative call to discipleship addresses this interconnected pair of questions in a confounding and challenging way. He claims that his disciples do not know the answer to either core question and are thus incapable of participating meaningfully in the purpose of individual and corporate existence as designed by the Creator.

Mark's testimony to Jesus claims nothing less than the following: the eternal Son of God entered this world by incarnation in order to resolve this baffling pair of core problems facing human beings, both individually and corporately. Initially, Jesus calls for a radical assessment of self-perception and God-perception in order to lead to a reconciled relationship with the true God, self, and others. This reconciled relationship with God is the essential foundation for transformed identity, character, and life.

The identity-shaping answer to these two core questions molds our character, attitudes, decisions, and actions (chapters 6 and 7) toward God, ourselves, and others. Particular expressions of discipleship thus arise from a fundamentally renewed relationship with the triune God and a true, God-centered view of ourselves and others. The disciplines of discipleship are never to be pursued in autonomy or self-sufficiency. Rather, they grow out

2. So Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006), in contrast to John Lennox, *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* (Oxford, UK: Lion-Hudson, 2009), and James Le Fanu, *Why Us? How Science Rediscovered the Mystery of Ourselves* (New York: Harper Press, 2009).

of a reconciled relationship with God and a personal realization of the need to be radically transformed. Thus confronted, we come to understand deeply that we are broken persons in need of both individual and communal transformation, healing, and purification.

Spiritual fruit such as ongoing surrender to God, faith, prayer, watching over our hearts, humility, forgiveness, steadfastness in the midst of persecution, and courageous proclamation of the gospel arise from a sober self-assessment of both brokenness and fragile beauty progressively renewed in relationship with the loving God. This holds true for any spiritual exercise or act.

The final outcome of Christ's call to discipleship is God-dependent, Christlike individuals and communities maturing in the context of the unending rule of God. And these maturing, transformed people and communities are called to have a transformative influence on their personal, cultural, economic, scientific, and political surroundings until Christ returns (see chapter 9). Authentic witness to Jesus brings forth authentic discipleship in the context of the growing messianic kingdom of God.



Part 1

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Mark as Biography  
and Message of  
God's Eternal Rule

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# Mark as Biography and Memorized Witness Account

## Mark's Use of the Ancient Genre of Bios

In antiquity, the general maxim held true that “form serves content.” This means that formal analyses guide the reader in the proper understanding of content. Determining the genre of Mark's account thus serves to identify how the hearer or reader is meant to interpret the content. Should the text be taken as a fictitious story, a philosophical treatise, an historical novel, or a biographical sketch? This determination guides the audience in its author-intended expectation, since the author conveys objective hints by means of his selection of genre.

Mark identifies his account in 1:1 as “good news” (gospel). In the following discussion, we must briefly clarify what Mark's explicit description “good news” signifies and what the literary character (genre) of this “gospel” is.

Simply put, Mark's Gospel is an account of “good news”<sup>1</sup> containing both descriptions of events and messages. As the Markan Gospel account is analyzed in terms of its specific characteristics,<sup>2</sup> it fits best the general genre of ancient bios. In other words: Mark claims to present a biographical sketch (*bios*) of a hero, containing descriptions of events and messages as good news.

1. In the Greco-Roman world the term conveys an imperial proclamation, e.g., of a military victory.

2. Genre can be defined in simple terms as a recurring, recognizable literary pattern.

Typically, the ancient format of bios includes a brief introduction (with an optional infancy section), then proceeds to give select anecdotes (stories, dialogues, special events, characteristic statements) depicted from the mature years of the main character, and ends with a description of how the main character died, often asking whether or not he denied what he stood for during his lifetime. What is unique in the type of bios Mark presents is the fact that the (innocent) death of the main character is not only mentioned but featured as the character's life goal. The fact that the hero dies by shameful crucifixion is a problem only if his innocence is uncertain.

It would be wrong to compare such an ancient bios-account with the literary form of a modern comprehensive biography. What this ancient genre indicates is that Mark functions within Greco-Roman and Jewish conventions of his time which intend to give reliable biographical data while not giving an exhaustive life story.

Unlike historical-critical scholarship, which often denies that much of Mark's account is historically authentic, the term "good news" and the genre of Mark's Gospel account both claim historical authenticity and an authoritative message. The good news, cast in the genre of bios as ancient biography, suggests that Mark intends to convey both a credible historical witness account and an appeal (in fact, Christ's appeal), drawing attention to the significance of the recounted events. The gospel genre of bios, conveying good news, portrays itself as proclamation through historical witness.<sup>3</sup>

In an extensive study, Richard Burridge<sup>4</sup> analyzes ten differently dated Greco-Roman biographies and concludes that the Gospels conform to the (rather flexible) literary genre of

3. See Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1977).

4. Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992). A summarizing essay, "About People, by People, for People: Gospel Genre and Audiences," by Burridge appeared in Richard Bauckham, ed., *The Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 113–45. See also Paul Barnett, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity. A History of New Testament Times* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 137.

(religious) *bioi* rather than to alternate genres such as “philosophical treatises,” “deeds of heroes,” “memoirs of heroes,” the genre of the “Jewish apocalyptic drama,” or accounts of “divine men.”<sup>5</sup> Accounts of “divine men,” for example, narrate their subject’s miracles, martyrdoms, and metamorphoses into divine beings, thus displaying significant differences from the approach of the canonical Gospels. Among them are: (1) the genre of these accounts is difficult to determine; (2) many of these collections postdate the canonical Gospels; and (3) parallels to the canonical Gospels are limited to superficial analogies.<sup>6</sup> While Jesus also performs miracles, his kingdom-mission provides a context and purpose for his miracles. This aspect is conspicuously missing in the accounts of “divine men.”

*Bioi* in antiquity primarily describe the mature life of key persons who are mentioned at the beginning of the accounts. A simple chronological sequence, especially noticeable at the beginning and end of an account, is complemented by various thematic insertions in the middle section. *Bioi* rely on oral and written sources concerning the hero’s actions and words to provide an anecdotal biographical sketch of the hero. These biographical descriptions are mostly serious in tone and display respect for the hero.

Paul Barnett<sup>7</sup> further differentiates Burridge’s conclusions by stating that the canonical passion accounts run, to a degree, counter to the general bios genre. While classical bios-accounts observe the way in which an important figure dies,<sup>8</sup> including the dying person’s last words, nowhere besides the canonical Gospels is there the notion that the goal of the main character’s life was to die. Nor is there an explicit acknowledgment elsewhere of the most shameful and offensive

5. See Burridge, “About People,” in: Richard Bauckham, *The Gospels*, 113–45.

6. See W. R. Telford, *Mark* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 97, and especially Barry Blackburn, *Theios Aner* (Philadelphia: Coronet Books, 1990), 13–72.

7. Paul Barnett, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 159.

8. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels?*, 142–49.

form of execution by crucifixion. And finally, there is no parallel in other bios-accounts to the liberating and reconciling effect of the hero's death. Barnett's observations also support the notion that the Gospel account as bios is both historical witness and proclamation.

A final important observation regarding bios is that the character of its hero is often intended to be imitated by the reader/hearer.<sup>9</sup> This raises the intriguing question as to what degree the very genre of Mark's account hints that Jesus' person and actions are to be imitated by his followers. We will argue that Jesus teaches, exemplifies, and above all enables "pattern-imitation" among his followers rather than simply calling for a simplistic, self-generated "copying of Christ." But we must take note of a "pattern-imitation theme" embedded in the genre itself.

### **Mark as a Systematically Memorized Witness Account**

Mark's account of the "good-news-about-(and from)-Jesus" seems to fit well into the ancient genre of bios. Mark was thus written with the intent of providing a reliable sketch of Jesus' public appearances with the additional aim of engendering a form of pattern-imitation. As we will see, the kind of imitation contained in the message of this bios-account is solidly based on Jesus' own teaching and work as he enables his followers to grow in core values, attitudes, and actions.

Under Jesus' tutelage, the first disciples underwent a systematic memorization and training period in order to retain core elements of his teaching and actions. He also gave them a grid of interpretation for understanding his significance and that of his mission.

Jesus was an intentional teacher. The contents of his "curriculum" focused on a true understanding of both God's messianic rule and the identity and function of God's Messiah. The

9. David B. Capes, "Imitatio Christi and the Gospel Genre," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 13.1 (2003): 1-19.

disciples, who had already been trained biblically in their own homes and especially in synagogue schools (from about age 7 to age 14), learn from Jesus in the same way they learned in their synagogue schools—by memorization. In each case, memorization preceded understanding.

However, Jesus' teaching style exceeds that of the synagogue teachers by:

1. his contextualizing the learning process in real-life settings and dialogues, life-on-life teaching, and mentoring;
2. his authority further accentuating his teaching and embedding truths in the disciples' minds and hearts long before they truly understand;
3. his complementing this memorization process through the agency of the Holy Spirit (John 14:15–31; 16:4–24), who assists the disciples in recalling what Jesus had previously taught them.

Following is a brief overview of some of the elements that scholars<sup>10</sup> have presented to illuminate the elementary educational pattern in first-century Palestine. They argue that this furnishes the most convincing background for “Jesus as teacher” and thus for schematic and stereotyped oral transmission of the gospel witness prior to its written fixation. Jesus used among his initial disciples pedagogical principles similar to those used in elementary school education, in synagogue services, and in Jewish homes.<sup>11</sup> He did so in order to embed a memorized body of information in his disciples. The Gospel of Mark was then composed from a relatively wide pool of systematically memorized material.

10. Cf., e.g., Rainer Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer: Eine Untersuchung zum Ursprung der Evangelien-Überlieferung*, 3rd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1988); Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript* (Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1964 [Eng. trans.]); idem., *Tradition and Transmission in Early Christianity* (Lund: Gleerup, 1964); idem., *The Origins of the Gospel Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979); Henry Wansbrough, ed., *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1991).

11. See Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer*, 151–206, 137–51, and 102–18, respectively.

*Elementary School Education in First-Century Palestine*<sup>12</sup>

Elementary school education in first-century Palestine focused on oral transmission and retention of mainly written tradition (especially the Hebrew Old Testament).

*The Schoolhouse.* By the time Jesus taught in Palestine, Pharisees (and their predecessors) had long-established schools for the purpose of teaching the Torah to young boys. In Tiberias alone, some thirteen schools existed. The general pattern in first-century Judaism was to operate an elementary school in each of the widely spread synagogues, as well as, at times, an advanced school for students of the Torah and oral traditions.

*The Teacher.* Besides the task of teaching, the elementary school teacher was, at times, expected to serve as the synagogue attendant as well as a scribe (a copyist of manuscripts). Usually these elementary teachers received some recompense for their work, while the advanced teachers of the law had begun the habit of refraining from accepting pay several decades prior to Christ. In the eyes of advanced Torah teachers, elementary school teachers were thus inferior. This may have contributed to the trend in Jewish society to view elementary school teachers as part of the lower class of society.

*The Student.* Most boys in Jewish Palestine began their formal education at age seven and ended it by age fourteen.<sup>13</sup> School was held every day from sunup to sundown, except on the Sabbath. In the afternoon of each Sabbath, however, fathers would examine their sons on material learned during the previous week.

*Contents to Be Learned.* Learning various sections of the Hebrew Bible by heart lay at the center of elementary school edu-

12. For this and the following description of synagogue elementary education, see Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer*.

13. See, e.g., Josephus, *Life*, 7–9, who apparently completed elementary education at age fourteen.

cation. Of great importance was the memorization of liturgically important sections of Scripture (such as the “Shema” in Deuteronomy 6:4 and the Hallel Psalms 114–18), as this became useful for both the life of an adult Jew and his future participation in synagogue services.<sup>14</sup> At times, even Greek was taught in these schools. Tiberias and Sepphoris (a few miles north of Nazareth), for instance, had Greek-speaking members in their respective synagogues.

*Methods of Instruction.* Learning by heart<sup>15</sup> constituted the focus of education. Therefore, rote memorization was much more emphasized than creative, independent combination of facts or independent thinking. Proverbs 1–9, for instance, had to be memorized mechanically long before the message these chapters convey was understood and applied. The key to success was repetition.<sup>16</sup> Tradition holds that Hillel once remarked: “He who repeats his passage one hundred times is not to be compared with him who repeats his passage a hundred and one times.”<sup>17</sup> Various mnemonic aids were employed to reach the stated goal. A good number of biblical texts already contained such aids, such as alliteration (cf. Prov. 18:20–22) and acrostic poetry (cf. Prov. 31:10–31; Ps. 119). Further aids were metric structure as well as the use of paronomasia (wordplay) and cantillation (murmur). Additional mnemonic devices, such as “question and answer” or having the teacher begin a verse and letting the student finish, were common. All this was carried out with strict discipline.

### *Similarities and Dissimilarities with Jesus’ Approach to Teaching*

*Similarities.* There are striking methodological parallels between elementary school education in the first century A.D. and Jesus’ pedagogical approach. This suggests that he intentionally

14. Furthermore, learning the skills of reading and writing (by copying and dictation) was likewise accomplished by the use of Scriptures. Learning how to read often began with Leviticus, since it contained difficult texts. This was to prevent the pupils from guessing.

15. See also the oral traditions in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece, and Rome.

16. Cf. Josephus, *Against Apion*, 2.178.

17. Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer*, 194.

utilized these familiar methods of instruction. On account of this correspondence, the historical reconstruction of how the Gospels came into existence may be explainable in terms of the Gospel writers making use of fixed, stereotyped oral (and partially written) learning. Riesner points especially to the following facts:

- Jesus employs these methods of instruction in order to assure faithful transmission. The stereotyped method is visible in Jesus' references to and interpretations of Scripture, his use of summaries, and the rich employment of various Jewish figures of speech (*mašal*). Jesus' teaching style includes brevity, imagery, and the use of vivid language. He uses parallelism, rhythm, rhyme, chiasm, pairs, alliteration, assonance, and aphorisms. He also connects events with instruction and involves himself in memorable dialogues and controversial discussions.
- The disciples provide the personal continuity of tradition between Jesus' life and teaching and the beginnings of the messianic church. We note in this context the movement from "disciple" to "apostle," or "sent one."<sup>18</sup> The intent of all this is to facilitate memorization and preserving the continuity of witness-tradition.

*Dissimilarities.*<sup>19</sup> The following additional elements employed by Jesus are not typical for elementary school education, yet they accentuate Jesus' intent to embed stereotyped memory in his initial followers.

- The community which Jesus develops with his disciples surpasses that of the (sometimes close) pupil-teacher relationships. This intensifies the learning process.

18. See Herman Ridderbos, *Redemptive History and the New Testament Canon of Scripture* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1988), concerning the kerygmatic, apostolic, and teaching ministry of the disciples of Christ, all elements of which point back to the Christ of history.

19. For the following, see Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer*, 297–496.

- Jesus calls his pupils prophetically;<sup>20</sup> they do not simply come to him as was the case in advanced Torah schools (e.g., Saul of Tarsus seeking to be trained under Gamaliel). This factor emphasizes the initiative of the teacher to form and shape the pupil.<sup>21</sup>
- Parallel to this, Jesus' unusual authority (including his "I am" and "Amen" sayings) is without analogy in Judaism.
- The fact that Jesus sends out his disciples in pairs to teach and practice his instruction deepens learning and relationships while the message is being spread.
- A further factor in stereotyped memorization is the fact that the disciples report to Jesus what they had taught, accomplished, and failed in (Mark 6:30).
- Jesus teaches as an itinerant teacher and prophet, thus exposing the disciples to extensive repetition with slight variations. John Wenham notes: "It is inevitable that an itinerant preacher must repeat himself again and again, sometimes in identical words, sometimes with slight variations, sometimes with new applications; sometimes an old idea will appear in an entirely new dress."<sup>22</sup> Part of the literary symmetry and variation of the Gospels may thus be traceable to verbatim or near-verbatim repetitions and variations by Jesus himself.

The above-mentioned circumstances of stereotyped oral transmission are fundamental for reliable transmission of Jesus' teaching. Conservative collection and systematic transmission through oral and written means thus mark the general attitude toward his teaching (see Acts 20:35; 1 Cor. 7:10; 1 Cor. 11:23–25).<sup>23</sup>

20. Cf. Barnett, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity*, 140.

21. *Ibid.*

22. John W. Wenham, "Synoptic Independence and the Origin of Luke's Travel Narrative," *New Testament Studies* 27 (1981): 507–15 [509].

23. Cf. Earle Ellis, "Preformed Traditions and Their Implications for Pauline Christology," in *Christology, Controversy and Community*, ed. David Horrell and Christopher Mark Tuckett (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 303–20, esp. 310.

It must also be noted that there is considerable evidence that at least some of the disciples were bilingual, speaking Aramaic and Greek. This provides the assurance that Jesus' "curriculum" was safely transmitted from Aramaic to Greek. In appendix A, we provide a brief description of how the Gospel of Mark was most likely composed from such stereotyped oral learning of the disciples and cast in the genre of ancient bios.

## Conclusion

We can summarize by stating that John Mark, by way of Peter,<sup>24</sup> receives selections from a stereotyped and systematically memorized body of material containing "good news" about and from Jesus. The selections are cast in the genre of an ancient biographical account (bios), all of which is to shape and influence the readers/hearers in a significant way. Their lives are to be profoundly transformed by what they hear and read in Mark's Gospel.

24. See appendix A.