

We begin a series of studies in the Gospel according to Mark.

Mark 1: An Exposition

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The writer believes the author of this gospel to be John Mark the companion of the Apostle Peter, and that he drew on Peter's memories as well as on other sources in writing this gospel. The view of Cranfield on this point is accepted, while that of E. Schweizer is found unconvincing. Ralph P. Martin presents the arguments thoroughly, fairly and persuasively.

1:1 This verse sets the theme of the whole of this work of Mark.

Mark is presenting to us the Christian gospel in written form. The term gospel means a message or announcement of good news and was used for example for the announcement of a victory or for the birth of an emperor's son. It is a statement of the truth; it has content. But it is a statement that summons those who hear to faith. It is good news of something that has been done, and that is the main point, and it also carries consequences for those who hear.

The content of this good news is a person, Jesus Christ. The gospel has for its content this person, his significance and his work, and therefore this gospel is powerful in that it brings a human being into a new relationship with God and makes him a new person. The gospel also has authority for it is the gospel of Jesus Christ, it originated with him, it is not an invention of Mark or of some strange, faceless community.

And the identity of this Jesus is known, he is the Son of God. On the basis of style and usage we conclude that this phrase, the Son of God, is original and was written by St. Mark. Jesus' identity, here stated dogmatically, will become apparent to the man of faith as he reflects on the life of Jesus set out in the coming chapters.

Now we return to the opening word 'the beginning'. There are various ways of taking this opening; two ways are mentioned. First "beginning" may refer to the ministry of John the Baptist who prepared the way for Jesus and so can be said to be the beginning of the gospel. Secondly and more likely, this phrase "the beginning" stands at the opening of the gospel because it sums up all that is to come. The whole of the earthly life of Jesus, up to his ascension is the beginning of the gospel because the earthly life of Jesus is the historical foundation upon which the Christian gospel rests.

Mark wants us to be clear about the gospel from the start. It has an historical base, it rests on what is objectively

true; in the course of his narrative it will be clear that Mark records only that for which he has good evidence, he does not invent or embroider when he has no support from his sources. The gospel is good news about a person whose identity is known, he is the Son of God. The Jesus Christ we believe for salvation and follow in the way of the Cross and of humble service is the Christ who actually lived and about whom Mark tells us in his writing.

1:2 — 1:13 The immediate preparation.

(a) *The preparatory work of John the Baptist 1:2-8.* John, with his clothing of camel hair stands in the line of Old Testament prophets — the last and greatest! His coming and ministry are in fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy, e.g. Malachi 3:1 speaks of the coming of Elijah before the Messiah. Even in this backward look to the Old Testament the emphasis there discovered is that the

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forerunner will prepare the way for the Messiah. He will be concerned not with himself and his own fellow men but with the one who is to come.

His method is that of preaching. John appeared in the wilderness, probably east of Jordan, and as a prophet preached with such authority that he awakened great interest — all the country of Judea and all the people of Jerusalem want to hear him. The content of his message was to call his hearers to baptism with a view to the forgiveness of their sins. Washings of this sort were familiar to the Jews as a form of repentance as we can see from Isaiah 1:6; the Baptist is telling them that their birth as Jews does not automatically bring them into the Kingdom of God; membership is not a matter of privilege but of obedient living. John's baptism is a sacrament or sign of their desire for forgiveness and of their readiness to repent.

And John is deeply aware of the qualitative difference between himself and the coming Messiah; the difference is acknowledged in his own sense of unworthiness (such words are never used by Jesus!) and is shown in that John administered baptism of water which touches the outside only and is symbolic, while Jesus will bestow the gift of the Spirit, the gift of the Messiah. The emphasis falls not on the difference between water and Spirit baptism but upon the two who baptised so differently. The Messiah will accomplish the final work of God, the Baptist points to it and calls men to prepare.

At this point a question can be asked — did Mark record this ministry of John the Baptist only to show us how the scripture was fulfilled by John preparing the way for Jesus or did he record it also to suggest the church should engage in a preparatory work? Perhaps the preaching of the Law before the gospel? Jesus himself on the other hand begins straight away with the gospel: the kingdom of God is at hand.

(b) The Baptism of Jesus 1:9-11.

The chief reason why Jesus came for baptism is found in verse 11 where there is an echo of Isaiah 42:1 which speaks of the Lord's servant. So in submitting to John's baptism Jesus was not repenting of his own sin but was dedicating himself to his mission of self-identification with sinners in order to save them. Jesus was standing where sinners stand, putting his shoulder under the burden of their sins and placing himself in their place. Already he is setting out on the path of suffering service that was to lead him to the Cross. Baptism is associated with death in chapter 10:38, Jesus was aware of the shadow of the Cross falling across his path here at the beginning and still he is ready to walk that path marked out by his Father.

As Calvin has pointed out the fact that our Lord submitted to baptism is the basis of our baptism; as Cranfield puts it "our Lord's submission to baptism by John is the fundamental dominical institution of the Christian sacrament of baptism".

The voice from heaven is significant of the opening of Heaven by Jesus, the voice of God is heard again after long years when no prophet has spoken; and this voice assures Jesus, confirms his own consciousness of being the Son of God and being Son of God he must be the suffering servant of men. Here is a revealing of the true nature of God, he is love. The voice does not proclaim Jesus' newly established status as God's Son but confirms what already is and exists that he is and always was the Son of God.

Jesus both heard the voice and saw the dove descend, he was equipped with the Holy Spirit for his task as Messiah — he is at once the bearer and bestower of the Spirit. He needed the power of the Spirit for his work and he is the giver of the Spirit as Mark has already told us through the prophetic words of John the Baptist.

(c) The battle against the enemy begins 1:12-13.

Having been given the Spirit Jesus is led at once, driven by the Spirit, into the wilderness to be tempted by the Devil. The scripture has more to say about the Devil and

his warfare against God's purpose and God's people than usually we are prepared to admit. Jesus in bringing God's Kingdom has come to dislodge the usurper, and, at the very beginning of his ministry under the leading of the Spirit, he takes on the Evil One. Elsewhere the temptations are explained, while here in Mark the word for temptation tells us the Devil is bringing all his powers to bear to move Jesus away from the path of suffering service. He is tempting him with a view to his falling. And Jesus both resisted and overcame the Devil, and continued until his final victory in and through the Cross. Spiritual warfare can only be conducted victoriously in and through the Spirit of God but for those who are led and guided by the Spirit such warfare cannot be avoided. Satan is after all the Prince of this world who rules over an organised empire of evil and from whose control men are utterly unable to free themselves.

In this section we have the preparatory ministry of John, the acceptance by our Lord of his task to be the suffering servant of men, and the beginning of the consequent spiritual warfare.

1:14, 15 Jesus the Preacher

The last section finished on the note of spiritual warfare, Satan was engaged in direct battle. These two verses are a summary of Jesus' ministry, particularly of his early or Galilean ministry, and record the same warfare that carried on through serving men and women by preaching and teaching the good news.

Verse 14 does not preclude any activity on Jesus' part before John's arrest. But the arrest of John marked the beginning of Jesus' intensive ministry. As Cranfield points out there is a hint in the Greek word used for 'arrest' that John's arrest, although carried out by men, was within the providential planning and purpose of God. He was handed over.

Jesus' work was that of a preacher and teacher; he had come from God, was empowered by the Spirit of God and brought God's message. Here is the secret of any preacher's authority. For what astonished men about Jesus was his remarkable authority which they could not explain on grounds of status or formal education; he compelled attention and he provoked a decision. For the Christian preacher, authority lies in the fact of his call and commission by God, in his anointing with the Holy Spirit, and in his bringing God's message. Some years ago Lord Reith warned the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland that by failing passionately to believe its message the Church was turning "from its divine, conquering and to conquer mission, into an innocuous, ecclesiastical institution".

The gospel message is a statement, it is in the indicative; and that is always the order of true gospel preaching, the indicatives always precede the imperatives; the order is always this is true, here is the truth and then and therefore believe. Imperatives must always be reached by way of indicatives. The message is in two parts, "the time is fulfilled". The period of time between the formation of the plan and its execution has passed, God's appointed moment has arrived. Whatever the distinction between kairo and chronos, the context here means the time has arrived in the sense that the moment long

planned and prepared by God has arrived, the most decisive action in all of history has begun. And that action is the inbreaking of the kingdom or rule of God. This world is enemy occupied territory but at last God's rule is breaking in. And that rule has arrived in the person of the Lord Jesus who will establish God's kingdom by way of suffering service and his redeeming death upon the Cross and his resurrection; in a real sense Jesus is the kingdom of God. The kingdom has come near in the person of Jesus and in his person confronts men. Also and later Jesus speaks paradoxically of the kingdom having come, and yet having still to come. What needs to be grasped is that this coming of the kingdom in Jesus spoken of here is a real and true coming but is veiled, it is not obvious. If we had a video recording of the earthly life of Jesus, it would not prove that he was Son of God; he is Son of God but he is veiled. Thus man has room to make a responsible decision and to believe on him, only faith can pierce this veil and perceive the kingdom present in Jesus. When Jesus comes again, he will come unveiled and it will then be too late for repentance and faith. The kingdom came in Christ in all its fulness; the church now waits not for something more complete than Christ, but rather Christ made manifest and in glory. This truth recurs throughout the gospel.

This message, this indicative, calls for a response. Note the order of Jesus, first the statement, the proclamation, the truth, and then the response. And the connection is a therefore. Because God has done this therefore do that. We must not reverse the order and say if you repent and believe God's kingdom will come. That is to reverse the evangelical order and weaken the graciousness of the gospel. Calvin goes so far as to argue in the Institutes 3:3:2 that even here the order is faith then repentance, repentance flowing from faith for first the truth that the kingdom is Jesus has drawn near has to be accepted, the mind has to be persuaded, and then repentance follows and belief in the sense of commitment to Jesus Christ. At any rate the gospel summons men to repentance and faith.

1:16-39 The advance of the kingdom

The previous two verses are general. Now comes the particular; what happens as the kingdom advances into enemy occupied territory? Men are summoned into the life of discipleship, the people are taught, the sick are healed and demons are cast out. In other words Satan is being displaced by the authority of Jesus. Men are moving their allegiance from him to Jesus and his hold upon the minds, hearts and even bodies of men is being broken.

16-20 The call of the first disciples

This incident takes place on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus calls these four men to follow him. The incident strikes the reader as something which the Apostle Peter had seen, remembered and passed on to Mark. It is one of several incidents vividly described throughout the gospel. Probably this was not the first meeting of Jesus and these four men, but it is the decisive one. The call of Jesus is both stern and gracious, stern in that Jesus demands that they follow him unconditionally, gracious in that he will change them from fisherman into evangelists. The men do not seek Jesus, it is Jesus who finds them and calls them. Their response is immediate and complete. They recognise the divine compulsion

and however dimly grasp that in Jesus is the kingdom of God. Their response to him is both immediate and total: there is a leaving behind as well as a following. Always in principle this leaving and following is involved in the life of discipleship, there is no room for half measures in the kingdom of God.

21-28 The synagogue of Capernaum

Here again the authority of Jesus is seen; his teaching comes with such authority that it does not only grip his hearers but also provokes a demon, who possessed a man, to disclose itself. Jesus' priority was teaching and his teaching laid bare the needs and provoked the conflicts. He has the authority to meet human needs and here he casts out the demon. His authority creates a deep impression.

29-34 Simon Peter's mother-in-law and other sick folk

So it is with illness in the home, they naturally turn to Jesus whose authority is seen in healing. In this area too we have much to learn. Barth records an incident in which J.C. Blumhardt confronted by a case of sickness said, "we have seen long enough what the devil does, now we shall what the Lord Jesus can do".

35-39 The secret of Jesus

Such a demanding ministry could only be maintained out of a close fellowship and relationship with God the Father and this Jesus maintained through prayer even in the midst of such a demanding life. Clearly when medical care was inadequate sickness was an enormous problem and Jesus by his authority and ability offered hope to the hopeless and comfort to the pain ridden. Nevertheless his priority is preaching and teaching and in spite of all the pressures he maintained fellowship with his Father and worked in accordance with his Father's plan and in obedience to his Father's will.

1: 40-45 The compassion of Jesus

This section shows the astonishing love of Jesus: he encountered a leper, someone who repelled by his appearance and someone who did not doubt Jesus' ability to heal but could not believe that he loved such outcasts as he himself was. Jesus demonstrated his love not only by healing but also by touching the man who was both contagious and unclean, who was loathsome and repellent. An example of Jesus in his love identifying with sinners. One might speak of the incarnation principles.

This section closes on a warning note. The healed man disobeyed by telling men about Jesus; he spoke of him as a great healer rather than as the bringer of God's kingdom. He saw healing as an end in itself rather than as an inevitable consequence of the coming of the kingdom of God. Healing was a sign not an end in itself. So the message of this man was true but it was not the true message of Jesus. The gospel can be obscured by over emphasising one small part of Jesus' teaching and Lordship.

This first chapter of St. Mark's gospel closes with Jesus well launched on his ministry. He is a man of extraordinary authority and the kingdom of God in his person is advancing into enemy territory.