

A Problematic Use of Mark's Gospel

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Foreward

This is not intended to be a critique of anyone's current practices necessarily, but a theological, biblical, and ethical evaluation of one ministry practice within a particular time and place, so it can serve as a cautionary tale for others. Many years ago, I wrote a paper about how the Gospel of Mark, to the best of my understanding, had been abused within some circles of a campus ministry organization. I based this paper on many sets of Mark teaching notes written by various staff, and many conversations I had with former staff, current staff, and former students. I cited interpretive and theological problems, arguing that the Mark study reached conclusions that Mark and the other Gospel writers would not have agreed with, suggesting that these problems served the prevailing organizational philosophy and a few key personalities. This paper, with my name removed, was submitted to the ministry's national task force on discipleship, and was given the remark:

"This is a perceptive analysis of manuscript study as a teaching model. He stresses the ways that what was to be a direct access to the authoritative text become tools for staff to assume more authority. He recognizes that power manipulation can be dressed up in theological language and that intensive use of one portion of Scripture limits the mitigating effects of other biblical and theological emphases. He sees the value of minority ethnic student insights in both Bible study and mentoring, to keep identity development in the picture as well as leadership development. He does not recommend the abandoning of study of the Gospel of Mark, but rather the need to study other portions of Scripture with equal intensity and to retrain staff to use Mark manuscript study."

Original Paper

One of my concerns is that many people, in some Bible studies of Mark, experience the Jesus in Mark's Gospel as someone who is enigmatic, deliberately vague and terse, not desirous of giving them sympathetic and sensitive explanations, and always moving just out of reach. In some circles where Mark has been privileged for purposes of discipling younger believers, this phenomenon occurred with unusual frequency. The so-called 'S model' that entered the movement through GR and others in the 1980's reinforced the general linear approach to the Markan story and self-consciously built a ministry model around it. This raised the stakes not only for studying Mark, but for interpreting Mark in a certain way and making this Mark-derived theology the hermeneutical lens by which to interpret the rest of Scripture, one's own life, and the lives of others. I hasten to add that despite my disagreement with them over various matters, my affection for the individuals involved is high. I am an admirer of the team-based staff model, strong leadership, and other aspects of this ministry, and to some extent, can be interpreted as seeking a better ideological basis for it, with limitations on the use of rhetoric and power inherent to the model. And in their defense, I must also insist that the potential had always been latent in the traditional, inductive approach to Mark's Gospel. But it appears to me that not until the 'S model' influence – with their emphases on high commitment Christian community, extended times of community together, the priority of an Anabaptist 'withdrawal from the world' spirituality over an 'engagement with the world' spirituality, and a strong staff-led ministry model – did some of the potential abuses of Mark become clear.

The academic theological resources that were used in the 'S model' – namely Daniel Fuller's 'obedience of faith' hermeneutic as a way to understand and apply Scripture, his 'doctor-patient analogy' as a paradigm for understanding our relationship with God, John Piper's 'Christian hedonism' as a way to motivate believers to obey God, and later, Richard B. Hays' notions of 'ecclesiocentric hermeneutics' and 'hermeneutical freedom.' Suffice it to say here that these influences made a very dangerous combination. Through the 'obedience of faith' reading of Scripture, Law and gospel were collapsed into one, and insecurity was inserted into 'following Jesus.' For if saving faith is absolutely synonymous with obedience (and vice versa), one's areas of struggle, especially where obedience is difficult, become disconcerting symptoms of a lack of saving faith. The difficult pastoral balance between human will and God's will was decided completely in favor of human will; in some cases, the doctrine of eternal security was simply denied and salvation was presented as fairly unstable. The 'doctor-patient analogy,' though strong in preserving our sense of dependence on God, made one feel perpetually sick and unhealed on a basic level. The basic lens to view others through was that of 'sinner' rather than 'saint.' 'Christian hedonism,' the generally useful idea that it is always in your best interest to 'follow Jesus,' had as its downside the formation of a shallow rhetorical

well from which to drink. It was quick and catchy. But by oversimplifying our internal motivational structures, 'Christian hedonism' reduced people's sophistication in dealing with various issues and reduced people's sympathy with each other's faith-related struggles. Finally, 'ecclesiocentric hermeneutics' quickly became 'fellowship-centric hermeneutics' stemming from the desire, conscious or not, to favorably contrast the 'ministry model' with mediocrity in the wider Christian body. This legitimized the reading of 'our community' into virtually every passage, as if the fellowship community was the only community students participated in. Thus, the 'kingdom of God' was identified more or less with the fellowship, and Jesus was identified more or less with staff. The reader will detect these academic influences in the discussion that follows.

Mark's disciples fail. Although they jump enthusiastically on Jesus' bandwagon in the early chapters, by the middle of Mark's narrative, they struggle to understand even the clearest words Jesus says. It is painfully apparent that Jesus is not who they expected, and they struggle simply to keep pace with him. Mark gives us the impression that even their level of understanding barely increases after chapter 5. We are immediately confronted with the question of how we as readers should relate to these disciples.

Are we slated to follow in the disciples' footsteps, to fumble around and continually be afraid and confused, yet having to pursue Jesus regardless? Is that what faith is? It seems unlikely: Surely Mark intends for us to have a better experience with Jesus than the original disciples did. Perhaps Mark uses the disciples as a bad example for our learning. In some sense, there is something they do that we should *not* do. Reasonable enough, but the question then is, "What must we do differently?" This question may go unanswered, or is typically answered in vague terms like, "Just have more faith than them."

I believe that the apparent lack of intimacy between the disciples and Jesus that pervades Mark's Gospel is something that not only needs to be addressed, but something Mark wants us to address through multiple readings of his narrative. Correspondingly, various issues and topics go seemingly unaddressed in Mark. To name a few:

- The baptism of the Holy Spirit is introduced in 1:15 and expected in relation to Jesus, but we have no example of any of the disciples interacting with the Holy Spirit. To what extent is this the cause of their failures? What is the consequence of trying to 'follow Jesus' without a clear understanding of our relationship with the Holy Spirit?
- The problem of the unclean, hardened human heart is illustrated with the scribes early on (3:5), attributed to the disciples soon afterwards (6:52), explicitly addressed by Jesus with no resolution in a major discourse (7:21-23), and diagnosed as a consequence of the fall with Israelite divorce as a tolerated symptom, *even under conditions of Israelite faith* when the Mosaic covenant was ratified (10:1-11). How is the human heart really changed? Does Mark answer that? And what kind of faith is required for people to aim for higher ethical standards (e.g. no divorce) than the Law of Moses?
- Likewise the disciples' intractable resistance to servanthood is not resolved.
- Mark does not offer us a clear definition of this mysterious kingdom of God secret being alluded to everywhere. How are we to penetrate this mystery and participate in its secret?

I do not necessarily assume that Mark's Gospel was the earliest Gospel written, so I am not committed to the popular but tenuous assumption often accompanying it, that Mark's Gospel is the least 'adorned,' 'embellished,' and 'developed' theologically. These assumptions have led interpreters to an embarrassingly shallow understanding of Mark's Cross and Resurrection account. By contrast, this study finds significant and meaningful parallels between the Cross and Israel's Day of Atonement. In fact, we find that Mark has a very strong atonement theology, very similar to that of Hebrews and Paul in 2 Corinthians 3 – 5. We also find significant and meaningful parallels between Jesus' actions and Israel's new covenant prophecies, as well as persuasive explanations for why these parallels exist. Further, all of Mark's themes converge on the Cross and Resurrection, giving it enormous depth, much to the enjoyment of the reader. We find in Mark an emphasis which, in studies of Paul or John, is commonly called 'being in Jesus,' i.e. dying and rising with Jesus, and living in union with the risen Jesus by his Spirit. Mark does this in his own innovative way, and this from supposedly the 'earliest' Gospel.

After studying many sets of teaching notes written by various ministry staff on Mark's Gospel, I find that typically, the following question is asked after studying the first chapter of Mark: Is there a difference between 'following Jesus' and 'being a Christian'? The question is meant to be answered by our audience, 'Following Jesus is an ongoing process of choices; repentance is an ongoing process of choices; etc.' To some extent I sympathize with the intention behind asking this question, but I feel uneasy with it as well. Not only does this diminish one's ability to say, 'I am a new creation in Christ,' (e.g. Rom.6:1-11, 2 Cor.5:17), but the fact that Mark's disciples fail in their discipleship makes this type of question at least somewhat suspect. If the disciples thought they had to 'follow Jesus' and failed, what makes our chances of success any greater?

Some, having come to expect enigma, vagueness, and constant movement of Jesus in general, seem to be characterized by a high level of activism, a lack of prayer, and eventual burnout. This is not surprising. Teaching that drives a wedge between 'being in Jesus' (emphasized plainly by Paul and John) and 'following Jesus' (seemingly emphasized by Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which I will discuss later) by inserting an opposition between the two based on Mark's seeming portrayal of 'discipleship' is detrimental. Typically this is done by seeing one's relational nearness or distance to Jesus as being in a constant state of flux. Faithful obedience makes one an 'insider' or draws one 'close' to Jesus while resistance to him makes one a distant 'outsider' and reflects 'hardness of heart.' Not only does this set up an artificial distinction that is questionable upon closer analysis of Mark, it hurts Christians in the long run. While we can appreciate the desire to elevate 'following Jesus' because it seems to motivate ourselves and others to action more quickly, in light of the disciples' eventual failure to actually 'follow Jesus' (at least according to Mark), one wonders what was missing in their experience. If it was, as we suspect, an understanding of 'being in Jesus' by the Spirit, then we must confess to falling prey to a poignant irony. We encourage ourselves to imitate the disciples in the first half of the book, we give ourselves very little theological information because the disciples themselves had or comprehended very little information, then we ask ourselves to do better than the disciples in the latter half of the book with not much additional information, and we wind up duplicating the very conditions that caused the disciples to fail in the first place. A problematic issue thus arises 'immediately,' in Mark's own terms.

It appears that these studies in Mark's Gospel were tailored to address the following organizational needs.

Building Community. For better or worse, pragmatic concerns do shape the way we approach and apply Scripture, and perhaps no other concern more so than the desire to build group cohesion. While in itself acceptable within certain parameters, and while addressing a felt need among students to belong to a group, the emphasis on high commitment Christian community adds to the potential for abusing both Mark's Gospel and students. To varying degrees, this assertion about the importance of Christian community was made out to mean not Christian friendship in general but the fellowship in particular. More comments are made on this below.

Building Staff Authority. While all spiritual leaders establish credibility through their knowledge of the Scriptures, some staff created an aura of authority around themselves by reenacting a literary feature of Mark's Gospel: Jesus' disclosure of Messianic secrets to the disciples was replayed in Bible studies where staff disclosed the secrets of Mark's text to students, creating fascinating interpersonal dynamics. Certainly these staff did not suddenly become infallible in the eyes of students, but it must also be said that the superimposing of the Markan paradigm onto the Bible study process itself had deeper repercussions. If students welcomed staff, they were referred to or thought of as 'faithful.' If they did not, or if they questioned aspects of the call to be a part of the fellowship, at least a few leaders dubbed them 'hard of heart.' Regardless of how accurately these terms were defined in Mark study, and regardless of how seriously or jokingly these terms were used by staff and senior student leaders, the fact that powerful Markan language was used to describe other students' choices indicates that the Mark study at this point had ceased to be a true Bible study. It became an induction process into a ministry organization that was establishing their paradigm of Mark as the foundational theological paradigm by which to live. To varying degrees Mark became a parable, not of the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus, but of the fellowship and one's involvement in it.

Encouraging Students to Step Into Leadership. Furthermore, also to varying degrees, staff used the Mark manuscript study to raise students to leadership quickly. Because students participate in campus ministry for a relatively short time – a few years in college, with perhaps a few years after college if they join staff – the desire to see students step into positions of leadership often overrides the desire to give them more in-depth theological training. This matches up all too easily with Mark's portrayal of the disciples following after Jesus with very little

understanding of who he is. So what a student hears is that all that is necessary – yet at the same time, what absolutely must be done – is to respond to the invitation of this Jesus who discloses so little of himself. What ‘theology’ do they need to know in order to do this? Very little – look at how little the disciples understood! Perhaps students are told that they will acquire knowledge of ‘the Messianic secret’ after acts of faithful obedience to ‘follow Jesus.’ But do the disciples themselves stop failing and floundering by Mark 16:8? Not at all. One question, therefore, whether the real meaning of Mark’s story was extracted.

Regardless, students were encouraged to become small group leaders, worship leaders, coordinators, and Mark manuscript leaders themselves. While service is often good, what language was used to motivate them but Markan language? The disciples’ struggle to keep up with Jesus and die to themselves by serving as Jesus commanded became the foundational theological paradigm by which to understand progressing as a leader in the formal fellowship organization. The motif of parables in Mark’s storyline – that of obscurity which needs to be overcome by aggressive loyalty – or the motif of the crowd – that of a barrier which needs to be pressed through to reach Jesus – were then applied to anything preventing a student from stepping forward into formal positions of leadership. Numerous emotions therefore tended to be present in students who were used to interpreting their own experience solely by Mark’s storyline. If a student chose not to become a formal leader in the fellowship, she might wonder, “Am I being resistant to servanthood and therefore ‘hard of heart’ like the disciples in the two feedings?” For some, to not step up as a leader into the organization, even for good reasons, set off inner reverberations of guilt and fear.

Pinning Responsibility on the Other Person. The peculiar nature of Mark’s presentation – since it so emphasizes the disciples’ inadequate responses – led some ministry leaders to place the responsibility for ‘following Jesus’ almost completely on the younger people they led. While other people’s personal responsibility is of course important and ultimately fundamental, whether Mark’s picture of Jesus ministering to the disciples is a model for staff ministering to students raises intriguing questions. Can we as ministry leaders also be somewhat enigmatic and terse as we invite people to Jesus? Can we be vague on intellectual or theological questions asked by others or consider them irrelevant to the bottom line of faithfully obeying Jesus? Is it enough to show Jesus being compassionate for our readers to be attracted to him? Most importantly, can we regard other Christians’ lack of obedience to Jesus, frustration with Jesus, or lack of feeling intimacy with Jesus as primarily their own fault and not the fault of our own, possibly inadequate, teaching?

Developing a Ministry Model ‘Based on the Gospels’: While those questions are not going to be completely resolved here, at the very least we can point out that if one studied the other Gospels, one would reach different conclusions about how ministries ought to be led. Matthew’s Jesus is a very systematic teacher whose opening Sermon on the Mount challenges us about heart-level spiritual development and the relation between Jesus and the Old Testament. This places more of a burden on staff to teach systematically on various subjects; the current study of Mark does not place this burden on us. In Matthew, the portrayal of the disciples is much more positive; Matthew’s disciples learn something new at every turn, and this culminates in the Cross and the Resurrection. This leads to the view that discipleship culminates in understanding the Cross and Resurrection, another view missed by the current study of Mark. Matthew’s Jesus promises his presence at the Great Commission, which is the fulfillment of his birth-name, Immanuel, God with us. Matthew’s Gospel is thus bracketed by affirmations of Jesus’ presence with his disciples, assurances that are not present in Mark.

More problematic for the general approach to Mark’s Gospel is Luke’s Gospel. Whereas Mark emphasizes becoming an insider, Luke emphasizes reaching the outsider. Though not ultimately incompatible, the tendency for Mark’s spiritual dynamic to become an actual social dynamic in the fellowship is directly checked by Luke. Luke makes reaching the outsider more incumbent on the ministry’s leadership, requiring greater consideration for those on the periphery of the ministry.

In addition, in Luke, Jesus uses parables not to *obscure* truth like he does in Mark, but to illuminate, engage, and convict. The parables of Luke’s Jesus sizzle with increasing, not decreasing, clarity against the Jewish leadership (e.g. the prodigal son, the tax-collector and the Pharisee, etc.), climaxing with the parable of the vineyard, when the Pharisees ‘*understood* that he spoke this parable against them’ (Lk.20:19). This fact alone disrupts the idea that Jesus had only one parabolic strategy, a Markan one. This again places an incumbent responsibility on the leadership to *always* engage the periphery and the opposition. Unfortunately, staff drew the opposite conclusion. They reasoned that the strictly linear-Markan presentation of Jesus suggested that the fellowship engage the campus less and less, the less interest the campus showed in Jesus. Staff reinforced this by doing study of Luke’s *parables*,

but in isolation from Luke's *narrative*; Luke's parables were said to fit the linear-Markan paradigm of *decreasing* clarity and information in response to resistance and apathy. This idea, however, cannot be justified by the narrative of Luke. And this fact, along with (1) Luke's portrayal of the Holy Spirit's activity in people causing prophetic speech, (2) Luke's inclusion of Elizabeth, Zecharias, Mary, Simeon, and Anna citing Old Testament prophecies having to do with Messiah, and (3) Luke's insistence on rightly understanding Moses and the Prophets, would cause leadership to emphasize clarity in teaching.

Even more challenging is Luke's fairly charitable presentation of the disciples in contrast with Mark's negative one. In Mark, Jesus borders on exasperation. In Luke, however, Jesus' tone is quite different. He calls the crowds and the multitudes an 'unbelieving and perverse generation,' but mostly reserves kind and reassuring words for his disciples from start to finish. This makes it more difficult to chastise students for stumbling along in their spiritual development. In fact, Luke goes so far as to take away the disciples' responsibility to understand Jesus' prophecies of his own death and resurrection – precisely what Mark makes them appear most ridiculous for – and places the responsibility on God: Jesus' meaning was 'concealed from them' (Lk.9:45; 18:34; 24:16) until they encountered the resurrected Jesus (24:31). Why does he do this? While the general approach to Mark makes much of trusting and obeying Jesus in general, Luke does not permit us to leave matters so individualized and dehistoricized. He constrains our interpretation of the disciples' failure so that we would not try to believe more *fervently* than the disciples, but more *precisely* than them. Luke insists that we understand the epochal shift that occurred with Jesus' death and resurrection and then make our individual response relative to that. Luke also maintains a certain literary distance between his readers and the pre-resurrection disciples; readers and the original disciples cannot be collapsed into one.

Incidentally, I believe Mark is also pointing us toward that through union with Jesus' death and resurrection, but that perspective seems to be missing entirely from various leaders' notes on Mark's Gospel. My investigation into what points are drawn out of chapters 14 through 16 of Mark suggests to me that this portion of the study is the least exciting part of the bible study experience. Although the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus are purportedly the high point of our faith, staff seem confused as to how to relate the significance of these events to students through the current Mark manuscript.

Especially difficult for the current approach to Mark is John's Gospel, where Jesus insists that Christians can do nothing without understanding how to abide 'in him' (Jn.15:5). This, in addition to Jesus' verbosity and struggle to be understood, tends to place a significant burden on staffworkers to communicate the importance of 'being in Jesus,' the role of the Holy Spirit in that relation, and how to live 'in Christ' by the Spirit. John is more clear than any other Gospel – and perhaps even Paul – about the 'in Christ' language and its significance (Jn.7:38-39; 14:1 – 17:26). Namely, 'being in Christ' is basic to the functioning of the gospel and the Christian life. Like Luke, John is also clear about the centrality of the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus as the moment where 'being in Christ' becomes possible by the Spirit. 'The Spirit of truth...will be in you...In that day you shall know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you' (Jn.14:17-20). Jesus was speaking of the 'day' of his Resurrection, when he breathed the Spirit into the disciples (20:22), designating a new creation by echoing God's act of creating Adam. Perhaps the most important point to make about John's Gospel is what John reveals about the origin of the 'in Jesus' language. It did not originate with Paul at all, but with Jesus himself.

I highlight these differences among the Gospels because attention is usually drawn to a supposed tension between the Gospels and the Epistles. In Paul's Epistles, 'doctrine' and knowledge of what it means to 'be a Christian' generally come first, followed by pragmatic commands. In the narrative flow of the Gospels, however, we initially confront Jesus and are called to 'follow him.' Thus, in some circles, much is made of taking the Gospels rather than the Epistles as foundational for a 'ministry model,' with the enthusiasm of people rediscovering some long-neglected truth. However, almost no attention at all is given to the broad disparities among the Gospels themselves, probably because it is mistakenly assumed that Mark speaks for all the Gospels by virtue of being the first. The pastoral deductions often made about Mark using the idea of Markan priority are weak. If supposed chronological appearance is important, then the tables could be turned quite easily: we should privilege Luke or Matthew (with their supposed use of Mark as a source) over Mark because they 'improved' on him. To make a parallel, reading J.R.R. Tolkien's initial drafts of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, for all its choppiness, might be interesting, but his final version is certainly much more delightful. However, I do not consider this line of reasoning by chronology valid, and I will not pursue its convolutions.

Nevertheless, the disparities among the Gospels should be considered to show up the arbitrariness of privileging Mark as a 'ministry model.' The Lukan Jesus' first act was to preach sharply in the Nazareth synagogue against the Jews' ethnocentrism. The Matthean Jesus' first real act was to preach the Sermon on the Mount, where he set down sin-clarifying standards for internal and external obedience. The Markan Jesus, however, hits the topic of ethnocentrism only parabolically, and talks about sin later – and then only briefly – in Mark 7. So which 'Jesus' should we 'follow'? Should we challenge people's ethnocentrism the minute they step in the door with Luke's multi-ethnic and outcast-friendly Jesus? Should we challenge authority-leery people with Matthew's authoritative and sin-defining Jesus? Or should we summon people to a powerful but enigmatic Jesus who remains shrewdly obscure about himself? The latter seems more palatable, incidentally, to postmodern white people resistant to authority.

This short mental exercise demonstrates the arbitrariness of reading one or all of the Gospels as a 'ministry model' supposedly derivable from Jesus. It also demonstrates a cultural, racial bias: why should the interests of postmodern white Americans win out over others in Christian ministry? Virtually no attention is given to the fact that the Gospels are not simply about 'discipleship,' but about how Jesus' Cross and Resurrection revolutionize 'discipleship.' One could argue that if a 'ministry model' should be deduced from Jesus, the four Gospels should at least be taken together and integrated, if they can be integrated at all. This analysis of Mark will pave the way for that possibility. In fact, scholarship must engage this question, and we should heed the outcome of scholarly discussion. For if the fundamental emphases of the Gospels cannot be reconciled by scholarship, then the question of which Gospel to teach from will easily degenerate into a struggle to be the person in power.

Prioritizing Leadership Development Over Identity Development. In some fellowships, identity development was subsumed into or ignored in favor of leadership development, again on the basis of Mark's presentation of 'discipleship.' Because Mark does not have any explicit material on 'identity in Christ,' other than, arguably, the whole story in total, and has only a few subsections that can be put to that use (e.g. the baptism of Jesus, although for some to relate the audience to *Jesus* rather than to *the disciples* at this particular moment needs some other text to explain why we can do this), this theme is typically not developed. So students received discipleship if they stepped forward into formal leadership positions, and their discipleship revolved around ministry skills and one's self-concept as an effective leader. Though students experienced many good things, and while I too am eager for students to take up leadership positions, I have misgivings about how this was done.

There are ministry models where the people who are interested in leadership, show leadership potential, or are already leaders, get training and discipleship. Recent books on church growth advocate these models as well. While this strategy is often effective because we get the most results for our energy, it can have its excesses. Such ministries quickly tend to develop an organizational legalism where people receive spiritual care and training only if they are leaders (potential or actual) in some formal way the organization rewards. People with speaking ability, social skills, etc. are seen as potential leaders. The main question is whether they demonstrate loyalty to the group as a whole and/or to staff. We then invest in them to the exclusion of others. If this happens, our ministry becomes elitist and duplicates the elitism of the world. Furthermore, the organization tends to reproduce some good leadership principles in people, but what else is not always certain. If most of the lessons drawn out of Mark have to do with following after Jesus and serving in his name, and if that gets translated in the minds of students to following staff and serving the fellowship, then there is not much discussion of identity development: how Jesus heals our emotional wounds, how he stabilizes our sense of self, how he empowers us to serve challenging people (e.g. the depressed and emotionally unstable, etc.), and how he empowers us in informal situations like our family, etc. And finally, Christians trained this way often place their sense of identity in their leadership abilities or role. This is perhaps the most troubling aspect of such ministries. While leadership development is a crucial part of discipleship, and while I firmly believe that a Christian must eventually be ready to disciple others, I believe training in leadership comes after training in identity and spirituality. The 'years of isolation' of Joseph, Moses, David, Jesus, and Paul all point to a critical and indefinite period of time where God develops a person's identity in isolation, something heavily communitarian models of ministry may mention, but have trouble assimilating because of the organizational desire to develop leaders as fast as possible.

In actual experience, relegating identity development to the sidelines had unfortunate effects. Two patterns can be briefly mentioned. First, outside high-achieving campuses, the so-called 'S model' based on the pseudo-Markan paradigm sometimes did not work as well as hoped (or without adjustments). Less high-achieving students were less able or willing to submerge their emotional struggles to the high aspirations of college ministry. The 'S model'

was at least somewhat premised on students being able to submerge their emotions for ministry in ways similar to the sublimation of personal pain in pursuit of secular excellence. The second pattern comes from my own encounters with former students. While in urban ministry, I was joined by three people – all graduates from different campuses on the West Coast that had been influenced by this model – who said they needed to ‘de-tox’ from their experience. In part this came from the stark realization that ‘results’ in urban ministry came much more slowly than in college ministry. Since their views of themselves were wrapped up around being an ‘effective leader’ who had ‘influence’ over others and saw ‘results,’ urban ministry served as a painful awakening to them that issues of their identity had gone neglected or had been badly constructed.

Challenges to the ‘S model,’ and by extension, some of the conclusions that were drawn from their use of Mark, came from various places. First, as mentioned above, the model did not work as effectively (or without adjustments) outside of the most elite universities. Second, some staff themselves started to experience burnout and depression when ministry was more difficult than they had expected, and their spirituality did not enable them to deal well with that. Third, staff did not always fit within the ministry model. The tendency for some leaders to be men who, on the Meyers-Briggs’ exam, were thinkers and often introverts limited their desire to ‘just hang out’ with others. Fourth, the influence of charismatic local churches influenced people towards prayer, non-human-centered power, and waiting on God. Fifth, exposure to systematic theology, particularly the christology section, challenged staff to rethink the importance of ‘being in Jesus,’ though while some modified their preaching, it is unclear to me how much this class has influenced anyone’s actual model of ministry or their handling of Mark.

Sixth, the model did not work well in building multi-ethnic fellowships. The tendency for non-white students to value involvement in their local churches made them less available to their fellowships. Too, some ethnic minorities found the fellowship-centered attitude limiting because of their interest in justice and ‘engagement with the world’ spirituality. Others did not enjoy the long, communal manuscript Bible study in the same way the more postmodern white students did. And the need to discuss ‘identity’ in the context of race and ethnicity also led to interest in Paul, who used the ‘in Christ’ language to build a Christian identity relativizing other sources of self-identification, i.e. race and ethnicity. This offset to some extent the false polarization between ‘following Jesus’ and ‘being in Christ’ set up in Mark manuscript study.

Finally, people wanting more diversity in the ministry, as well as those interested in charismatic spirituality, were drawn to Paul’s teaching on spiritual gifts. To varying degrees, Paul’s writings on the body of Christ and the gifts of the Spirit helped contribute to a more democratic, bottoms-up, individual-centric approach to creating organizational structures. While Paul, too, has of course been abused by church authorities, he is also the one who says that a person who is ‘in Christ’ logically requires that a more honoring attitude and rhetoric be taken towards her. This counterbalanced the tops-down, leadership-centric model derived from the Gospels’ portrait of Jesus leading the disciples, which was used as a pattern for staff leading students. From a management perspective, any tops-down vision at some point needs to be reconciled with bottoms-up concerns, feedback, and buy-in. Without Paul (and perhaps Mt.23:1-12), there is little ideological symmetry on this issue. Building a ministry model solely on the Gospels without any serious wrestling with Paul’s teaching on spiritual gifts therefore opens the door to an authoritarian management structure dressed up in theological language. Said differently, I suspect that a disdain for Paul can be correlated with leaders using a tops-down style of management and not wishing to be challenged.

It should be plainly noted that the justification for a tops-down managerial bent shares the same source as the notion that ‘following Jesus’ is more important than ‘being in Christ.’ The common source is the assertion that a ministry model can, or should, be ‘based on the Gospels.’ Due to their common parentage, where one idea is found, the other is not far behind. From a pastoral perspective, this pairing is disconcerting. Leaders insert a relational distance between Jesus and the believer that the believer is exhorted to overcome, most often through loyalty to the leadership. Like parents who maintain a relational distance from their children to encourage them to perform, leaders who use this model rhetorically withhold the fullness of intimacy with Jesus and place him at a distance – however large or small – from others so that they might take appropriate steps of faith, some of which are of themselves good (e.g. risk-taking, outreach, etc.), others of which are more or less leadership-centric (e.g. loyalty, attendance, etc). Under these conditions, subtle manipulation becomes extraordinarily easy because who else but the leadership declares which people are more ‘near to’ or ‘far from’ Jesus? And who else but the leadership defines what one must do to ‘follow Jesus’ more closely? Hence, one idea disguises the managerial design of the organization while the other projects it into the spiritual realm. This is, among other things, manipulation, and it starts at this precise point. In practice, the ministry may or may not sour quickly. The leadership may, at any given

time, have more healthy emotional boundaries and respect for individuals. Nevertheless, the point here is that the theological and organizational groundwork is laid for spiritual abuse to happen, as it did in some cases. A transition in leadership or the pursuit of fast growth can rapidly bring in unhealthy dynamics for which there is no ideological check, especially when the leadership is older than the rest of the fellowship and is given high levels of credibility, and when, in times of communal Scripture study and application, 'Jesus' and 'community' already tend to be hermeneutical place-holders for 'the strategic interests of the leadership.' Under these conditions, a gradual increase in intensity may catch people unawares. This is the potential fruit of a ministry model supposedly 'based on the Gospels,' but especially certain interpretations of Mark.

In my estimation, the potential for abuse is always present, especially since Mark's Gospel remains uniquely – and dangerously – attractive to ministry organizations, especially college campus ministries. Hence this study guide was written with the hope of stimulating awareness and dialogue, since it is my view that problems which have come to light in various places are not unique to those areas alone. My hope is not that it will 'solve' all our 'problems.' But I hope that it will address at least a few of them by placing self-imposed limits on our rhetorical and organizational power.