Each of the four gospels speaks of discipleship frequently and forcefully, and with a fundamental consistency. This is because, at heart, each is addressed in faith to people of faith. Indeed, what is written at the conclusion of the Fourth Gospel could very well be placed at the end of each gospel: “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this believing you may have life in his name” [Jn 20, 30f].

What differs, though, is the way each gospel nuances its understanding of what discipleship means. Matthean discipleship, for example, is set in the context of becoming the new Israel. A disciple listens to and does the new Law that is proclaimed by him who is at once new Moses and Emmanuel. Luke, with somewhat different fo-

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cus, underscores the universal call that goes out to everyone, none excluded, least of all the poor and outcast. Each person, whoever he or she may be, has to hear God’s gracious invitation, and then opt for a response that reflects that word in a way of living that is both compassionate and open to everyone. And in John the disciple seeks and finds and believes and clings to the Divine Word who has come from God and reveals the way, the truth and the life. Peter sums up the Fourth Gospel’s approach to discipleship so well: “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God” [Jn 6, 68-69].

Mark, too, has his own shading of discipleship. His good news to a suffering, perhaps even persecuted, non-Jewish community puts discipleship in the context of addressing people’s confusion and disillusionment. What is following Jesus all about? Is it supposed to result in opposition and rejection, or are Christians of Mark’s audience simply doing something wrong? Mark replies by affirming the place of the cross in the life of Jesus and all who belong to him. The cross, and the life-style that leads to it, is not just an accident, a mistake to be avoided. For Mark, the cross is the key to understanding who Jesus is, and sums up the underlying meaning of what proclaiming God’s Rule involves. Far from being alien to Christian discipleship, it symbolizes

2 Determining the contours of an evangelist’s community can only come from consideration of the text, and will always remain somewhat conjectural. Mark’s obviously Gentile audience, which needs explanations of Jewish details [7,3f.; 11,13; 12,42], the link between suffering and discipleship [8,34-38; 10,30.38f.; 13,9-13], and the build-up to the cross as climax of revelation [3,6; 8,31; 9,31; 10,33f.45; 15,39] are compatible with traditional ties of the author to Peter and Rome under Nero. Cfr. Brown, Introduction, 162f.; Augustine Stock, The Method and Message of Mark (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1989), 9-12; Patrick J. Flanagan, The Gospel of Mark Made Easy (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 12-15.

3 “The miracles are balanced by teaching in both word and deed. But the way in which Mark has outlined the story of Jesus suggests that the passion and death constituted its climax. Without the cross, the portrayals of Jesus as wonder-worker and teacher are unbalanced and without a directing principle.” Daniel J. Harrington, “The Gospel According to Mark,” in Raymond E. Brown et alii, Eds., The New Jerome Biblical Commentary (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1990), 597. Hereafter this commentary will be referred to as NJBC.
what is most proper to the following of Jesus.

This paper will study the meaning of discipleship in Mark’s Gospel, focusing on two easily neglected figures who — better than those officially called to discipleship — symbolize for Mark the ideal qualities of a follower of Jesus. Before discussing these two figures, however, two initial investigations will be undertaken. First, Mark’s consideration of discipleship will be set within the context of Mark’s overarching question to all who read his gospel: “Who do you say I am?” Secondly, Mark’s general teaching on discipleship will be presented. Only then will the paper focus on the two “unlikely” model disciples. Finally, the paper will conclude with some brief reflections for those following the path of discipleship today.

Mark’s Fundamental Question: “Who do you say that I am?”

People in Mark’s gospel more often react to Jesus with questions springing from amazement or doubt rather than faith. In the Capernaum synagogue, the opening scene of Jesus’ ministry, crowds wonder about his teaching [1,27]. Jewish leaders question his authority to forgive sins [2,7], his choice of companions [2,16], his seeming disregard for the Law and piety [2,18,24; 7,5]. Both crowds and disciples are struck by his deeds [2,12; 4,41], even while those who know him deprecate his seemingly new-found abilities [6,2].

These reactions build up an atmosphere that focuses attention on how people are to react to the mystery of this person Jesus, his words and deeds. Just who is he? That central question is posed initially by Herod [6,14-16]; it comes out point-blank at what may be considered the center of the gospel, perhaps its turning point.¹ There, in a scene

¹ Stock, Mark, 23-28, draws on work by B. Standaert and Bas Van Iersel in his discussion of a “fivefold concentric framework” in Mark, with 8,27—10,52 as the central passage. Ibid., 25, quotes Standaert, L’Évangile selon Marc: Composition et Genre Littéraire (Brugge: Sint Adriaansabdij, 1978), 174-75: “This central passage [8,27—9,1] gathers together all the principal themes, not only of the framing sections but of the entire gospel....” D.E. Nineham, The Gospel of St Mark (London: Penguin Books, 1963), 37, is less schematic, but no less insistent on the central role of this section: “The Gospel divides fairly sharply into two parts, each
which echoes that with Herod, Jesus himself directs the question to Peter and, ultimately, to all his disciples. "But who do you say that I am?" [8,29] In many ways, that is the question every reader of Mark must answer.

The response begins to be articulated in the second part of the gospel. Setting aside questions for a while, Mark has Jesus teaching "openly" [8,31] about the "Son of Man," his fate, and what characterizes his way of proceeding. Only in final conflicts with Jewish leaders in Jerusalem [11,28; 12,14.23.28] do questions about his authority and teaching again resurface. During the Passion, too, both the chief priest and Pilate directly ask Jesus to identify himself [14,61; 15,2]. It is only on the cross, however, at the moment of Jesus' death, the climax of Mark's gospel, that the one real answer to all the questions is given. The presumably pagan centurion, "seeing the way he breathed his last," utters what has to be the Christian disciple's fundamental answer to the question posed in 8,29: "Truly this man was God's son!" [15,39]

Discipleship and Would-be Disciples

As Mark unfolds his presentation of who Jesus is, he also highlights in several key passages just what being a disciple of Jesus involves. Two important passages [1,16-20 and 3,13-19] concern the calling of the Twelve, men closely associated with Jesus and his mission. Indeed, both these passages need to be seen as related to, even extensions of, Mark's summary of Jesus' message, the proclamation of God's Rule [1,14-15]. Discipleship is also the underlying theme of an entire section, Mark 8,31—10,45. There, in contrast to the mystery with its own clearly marked characteristics. Down to 8,26 the emphasis falls very largely on the miraculous deeds of Jesus . . . Jesus strives to prevent recognition of his Messiahship and there is practically no teaching about it. After 8,31 we notice a change in all these respects. Miraculous healings become very rare and the emphasis falls far more on Jesus' teaching . . . for the most part directed only to the disciples . . . . Between these two parts of the Gospel comes the story (8,27-30) of an incident when the twelve were alone with Jesus near Caesarea Philippi . . . ."

5 Jesus' call is above all to participate in his mission. In Mk 1,17 his followers are to "fish for people." The term may well point to their sharing in the eschatological task of
generated by Mark’s “Messianic Secret,” Jesus “openly” teaches what it means to take up one’s cross and follow him. In a series of almost disparate incidents Mark sketches essential traits that should characterize those who are disciples.

It is ironic, of course, that those most clearly designated Jesus’ disciples in Mark, the Twelve, are hardly examples of what following Jesus implies. True, they do respond to Jesus’ call and physically put themselves in his company, but rarely if ever do they manifest the qualities associated with Markan discipleship. Characteristically blind, filled with their own expectations of who Jesus should be, ambitious, they are more frequently obstacles to than examples of what Jesus stands for. In his own words to Peter, they set their minds on human rather than divine things [8,33].

This somewhat negative portrayal of the Twelve in Mark contrasts with what we find in the other Synoptics. Mark provides an almost undiluted portrayal of Jesus’ closest followers prior to the transforming events of Easter. Matthew and Luke, however, prefer to assimilate elements of the Twelve’s post-Resurrection faith, and retroject these

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6 Populated by W. Wrede at the turn of the century, this “secret” technique was supposedly “Mark’s way of accounting for the fact that Jesus in his public ministry neither claimed to be the Messiah nor was recognized as such.” Harrington, “Mark”, 597. It probably tries to deal with why so many of his contemporaries could not grasp who Jesus was: without faith Jesus remained ambiguous. His being messiah only became clear in light of the cross and resurrection. Brown, Introduction, 153, indicates that Markan secrecy “may have its roots in Jesus’ historical rejection of some messianic aspirations of his own time and his having no developed theological language to express his identity.”

7 For a sampling of his disciples’ getting in the way, misunderstanding, or manifesting false attitudes, cf. 1,36f.; 4,38; 5,31; 6,37; 6,52; 8,14-21.32f.; 9,5f.32.33f.;10,13.35-38; 14,4f.37.40f.66-72. Peter is especially inept, perhaps an indicator of his own influence in the Markan tradition. “Not only is there a disproportionately large amount of material about Peter himself, but much of it is of so unflattering a kind that it is felt unlikely to have been reported about the prince of the apostles by anyone except himself.” Nineham, Mark, 27.
back into the period of Jesus’ ministry. There are numerous illustrations of this contrast.

Consider, for example, the reaction of the disciples during the storm at sea [4,35-41]. Mark’s disciples, with “no faith,” testily criticize the “Teacher” for having “no care that we are perishing” [4,38-40]. Matthew’s, albeit their faith is only “little,” practically invoke divine assistance: “Lord, save us! We are perishing!” [8,25] Again, compare the reaction of Jesus to Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi. Mark’s stern order for them not to tell anyone about Jesus’ being Messiah [8,30] in no way prepares us for the encomium and commissioning that Peter receives in Mt 16,17-19. Nor can we fail to notice the way James and John’s embarrassing ambition in Mk 10,35-37 is deflected onto their mother in Mt 20,20-22, and quietly buried by Luke under Last Supper admonitions [Lk 22,24-27].

Thus, though Mark does indeed give attention to the meaning of Christian discipleship, he does not, in contrast to other gospels, make those whom Jesus specifically designates as disciples the best models of what discipleship involves.

To Be Disciple: Main Markan Texts

As happens in each of the canonical gospels, Mark has Jesus calling disciples right from the start of his ministry. Peter, James, and John, the eventual pillars of the early Christian community, are chosen in 1,16-20. This call follows immediately on Mark’s summary [1,14-15] of what Jesus’ message is all about. Discipleship, then, is first of all to be seen as response to and involvement in what Jesus stands for.

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8 Matthew, engaged in a bitter polemic with Pharisaic Judaism about who was the true Israel, has no interest in making the leaders of the Christian community look bad. They represent the people of faith who stand in stark contrast to the “fruitless tree” that is to be cut down and burned [3,10; 7,17-20; 12,33-37]. Luke with his universal outreach turns no one away. His focus is on “all flesh’s seeing the salvation of God” [3,6; Acts 2,17,21] by listening to God’s word of compassion and deciding to live it. The disciples of Jesus are the core of those who listen and respond; in Acts, they become prophetic figures in continuity with Jesus, witnesses who proclaim God’s word to the ends of the earth. Note the positive tone of passages like 5,1-11; 10,21-24; 11,1; 22,31f; 24,44-49; Acts 1,8.
From this perspective, disciples are those who see that God’s reign is near, close at hand. They are therefore ready to change how they see things, to break with former ways of behavior, to turn their lives around. They are ready to commit themselves in faith to the good news that God’s reign is all that counts. In concrete practice, disciples are people like Peter and his companions who are willing to change their routine lives, leave behind their possessions and personal ties, and follow Jesus.

Mark 3,13-19 elaborates on these essentials as Jesus formally designates the Twelve. True, the Twelve are a core group who will exercise a special role in sharing Jesus’ mission and, ultimately, in witnessing to his resurrection. Even so, this group does embody characteristics of all those who will be disciples. Thus, the passage brings together a number of key elements involved in discipleship. First of all, the call to be disciple starts with Christ: Jesus “called to him those whom he wanted.” Equally important, Christ’s call needs a response: “they came

9 “The Greek word (metanoein) means literally ‘to change one’s mind’, but as used in the New Testament, it comes very near to the Old Testament word sthwbh (‘to turn back’, cf. e.g. Joel 2,12-13), implying a coming to one’s senses, a deliberate turning away from one’s sinful past towards God, with the corollary of a change in conduct.” Nineham, Mark, 69. This might better fit use of the term by the Baptist, with his emphasis on “baptism for the forgiveness of sins” [Mk 1,4]. But when Jesus’ preaching joins the term closely with faith in the Good News, and drops the reference to baptism, a new dimension enters: metanoeis is the first step of fully committing oneself to Christian faith, a full reorientation of life. Cf. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, Exegetisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament, II [Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 1981], 1027. Also, Harrington, Mark, 600.

10 Drawn from the midst of Jesus’ disciples, the Twelve are never to be considered separate from them. The very number symbolizes the people of God to whom they belong. “The restoration of the twelve tribes of Israel as the OT background of Jesus’ act throws a clear light on the new meaning of the Twelve. What happened on Mt. Sinai now finds a new and definitive interpretation. In Mark’s understanding the Twelve are the representatives of the new salvation community.” Stock, Mark, 124. Vatican II nicely combines the sense of being chosen for special ministry while remaining part of God’s people in its decree on the priesthood, “Presbyterorum Ordinis,” n. 3: “By their vocation and ordination, priests of the New Testament are indeed set apart in a certain sense within the midst of God’s people. But this is so, not that they may be separated from this people or from any man, but that they may be totally dedicated to the work for which the Lord has raised them up.” Walter M. Abbott [ed.], The Documents of Vatican II (New York: America Press, 1966), 536f.
to him." Next, discipleship primarily means companionship with Christ. They are "to be with him" [3,14].\textsuperscript{11} It is out of this being with Jesus that disciples can be sent to do what Jesus did, viz., proclaim his message about God's reign, and overthrow the power of evil that has arrayed itself against that rule. Finally, disciples are not abstractions. They are real people: with real names and backgrounds and personalities and, especially in Mark's gospel, with real limitations and faults.

Mark moves further in defining the traits of discipleship in the second part of the gospel after Caesarea Philippi, as Jesus moves toward Jerusalem [8,31—10,45]. This section is set off by two incidents involving blind men. The two blind men do not appear by chance. As Mark is fond of doing, he uses this 'inclusion' to provide the outer boundaries of a passage (in this case, a section), while offering substantial hints about what it contains.\textsuperscript{12} More than simple cures, the blind men incidents actually function in service of Mark's teachings on discipleship.

The first blind man [8,22-26] follows immediately on a passage which underscores quite poignantly the disciples' inability to appreciate who Jesus is and what he is about. The repeated question, "Do you not understand?"[8,17f.21], simply summarizes what to this point has been the general reaction to Jesus throughout the gospel. Jewish leaders have rejected him [3,6], his family and familiars have remained skeptical [3,21; 6,1-6], and not even those who have followed him seem able to penetrate beyond the surface [8,14-21]. Clearly, if these latter are to see, it will require Jesus' own efforts to gradually lead them to sight.

\textsuperscript{11} Mark alone of the gospels mentions this, almost as a prerequisite for participating in Jesus' mission. Cf. John 1,38f. for a related, but not completely parallel, idea.

\textsuperscript{12} Simply put, an inclusion is a literary technique by which an author "mentions a detail (or makes an allusion) at the end of a section that matches a similar detail at the beginning of the section. This is a way of packaging sections by tying together the beginning and the end." Brown, Introduction, 336. This was a popular rhetorical device, and could be quite elaborately utilized in the period when Mark wrote. The Book of Wisdom, one of the last books of the Old Testament which dates from the last half of the first century B.C., is a case study in the variety of ways inclusions could be used. Cf. Addison G. Wright, "Wisdom" in NJBC, 512.
It is to symbolize the process of making blind disciples into seeing ones that explains the placing of the blind man incident just before a significant teaching section, where Jesus will for the first time “openly” begin to speak of the paschal events, and expand on what is needed to be a true follower. This deeper symbol also is the key to interpreting Jesus’ apparent “failure” to cure the blind man, why he must work on him a second time if he is fully to see. Mark is simply using the incident to indicate how Jesus’ words and example will be needed to gradually bring his own disciples to full seeing. The Father’s words at the Transfiguration will put it quite directly: “This is my beloved Son, listen to him” [9,7].

Mark’s expanded presentation of what discipleship entails is introduced by the famous question on the road to Caesarea Philippi [8,27-30]. Peter does answer correctly: Jesus is the Messiah. Unfortunately, and how typically in Mark, Peter has the right answer for the wrong reasons, as very quickly becomes evident [8,32f.]. Nevertheless, the exchange does launch an entire section that gradually highlights the qualities that make a mere follower into a seeing, hearing, understanding disciple [cf. 8,17f.]. This part of Mark concludes, quite appropri-

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13 This is the one time in any of the gospels where Jesus seems to struggle at a cure. Usually, all that is needed is a word or touch. Hardly suprising, then, that the other evangelists drop the incident. Matthew cleverly absorbs it into the healing of two blind men [9,27-31], which partially resembles his parallel to the Bartimaeus [metamorphosed by Matthew into two anonymous blind men] account in 20,29-34.

14 Given the variety of expectations in post-exilic Judaism as to how and by whom God would intervene on behalf of Israel, it is hardly surprising that Peter would miss the mark. There is thus far no clear evidence of a pre-Christian description of a suffering Messiah, nor an “expectation of a divine Messiah in the sense in which Jesus is professed as Son of God. Moreover, a nationalistic coloring was never absent from any stage of the preChristian development of messianic thought, any more than the OT concept of salvation itself was devoid of earthly and nationalistic aspects.” Raymond E. Brown, An Introduction to New Testament Christology (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), 160f. With the term “messiah” so open to misinterpretation, Mark’s Jesus avoids using it for himself, preferring instead the more ambiguous “Son of Man.” Though there is “massive modern disagreement about whether this was a title in Jesus’ time, what it may have meant, and whether Jesus used it of himself,” Brown argues that “part of the reason that it appears in the Gospels in a way the ‘Messiah’ and ‘the Son of God’ do not is precisely because this description was remembered to have come from Jesus in a very affirmasive manner.” Ibid., 89,99.
ately, with a second blind man: one who embodies the very qualities of discipleship that have been emphasized.

### Qualities of Discipleship in 8,31—10,45

Jesus begins this teaching on discipleship by clearly identifying himself with the paschal events of his death and resurrection [8,31]. He will repeat this teaching two more times in the section [9,31; 10,33f.]. There can be no missing the point, as Peter tries to do [8,32]: those who would be disciples must learn to take up their crosses and follow Jesus. The paschal mystery must remain at the heart of their association with Jesus, the Messiah [8,29.34f.]. It is in this context that the climax of the Transfiguration scene assumes added meaning. Complementing the cross theme with images proper to an anticipated resurrection, the Transfiguration reminds us that “it [will be] good for us to be here” only if we truly listen to the Beloved Son who teaches us that discipleship must follow the way of the cross [9,5.7]. There is no one else but Jesus who can point out that way, for he is the one who will walk it first [9,8].

Building on the foundation of what is nothing else than the Christian kerygma, Mark’s fills out his picture of discipleship by showing what key components are needed to enable close identification with the dying and rising of Jesus. At least three might be mentioned: faith, spiritual freedom or detachment, a spirit of humble service. These qualities are exemplified in key passages of Mark 9 and 10, and they are ultimately embodied in the blind man whose story concludes the section.

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15 Mark invests Jesus in the second part of the gospel with “shepherd” imagery. He introduces the first feeding account with reference to Jesus’ compassion on the crowds “because they were like sheep without a shepherd” [6,34]. Both readings recall the desert experience of Israel [expanded to include Gentiles in 8,1-9], cared for by Yahweh, Shepherd of Israel. Jesus walks ahead of the disciples on the road to Jerusalem [10,32], perhaps adding extra sense to his previous rebuke of Peter: “Get behind me, Satan!” [8,33]. At the Last Supper, Zechariah 13,7 is cited: the shepherd will be struck and the sheep scattered [14,27]. Finally, at the tomb, the angel tells the women “he is going before you to Galilee” [16,7], where he will be seen as promised. Obviously, in all of this, it is not just physical following of Jesus that makes people disciples.
Faith is at the heart of the passage dealing with the spirit-possessed boy [9,14-29]. Jesus complains about the obtuseness of the "faithless generation" he is dealing with. Then, in the short dialogue with the boy's father, he challenges the man's wavering attitude: "If you are able! All things can be done for the one who believes" [9,23]. The father's anguished cry remains one of the most memorable of Scripture texts: "I believe; help my unbelief!" [9,24]. The final verses of the passage, which insert the theme of prayer [9,28f.] are a distracting late addition.⁶ Faith is what disciples need if they are to do what Jesus does. He is one who has consummate trust in his Father.¹⁷ So, too, must all who would follow him.

The second quality of disciples might be described as inner freedom, the spirit of not being held back by anything, so that they can stay close to Christ. This is brought out by two incidents that really should be seen in contrast to each other: Jesus' blessing the children, and his encounter with the rich man [10,13-16.17-31]. Mark has already used the child in connection with what is last and least [9,35-37]. Here, though, the emphasis seems to be on children's particular aptness for drawing close to Jesus. In their weakness and powerlessness, they remain open to God's reign, fully intent on being touched by Christ.¹⁸ The only thing that holds them back is the mistaken attitude

⁶ "The verses are almost universally regarded by commentators as a late addition to the story, reflecting the experience of the early Church. Neither the main body of the story itself, nor the general picture given in the Gospels, suggest that Jesus specially stressed prayer in connexion with exorcism. . . ." Nineham, Mark, 244f. On the other hand, John Meier, A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, II (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 670f., n41, though agreeing that the verses are a "redactional tacking-on of a moral lesson on prayer" inclines toward seeing this as "Mark's redaction of a pre-Markan narrative for his own purposes." Nineham's position is more compatible with the argument of this paper. Meier's work will hereafter be referred to as Marginal Jew.

¹⁷ Mark portrays Jesus as one who turns to his "Abba" for guidance and strength, and who believes and trusts in that Father's power to provide it [1,35-38; 4,38; 14,36; 15,34]. The parables of the sower, the seed growing by itself, and the mustard seed in Mk 4 all reveal an underlying confidence that despite present appearances, God will bring about the Kingdom.

¹⁸ "Being physically close to, even touching, Christ is for Mark a sign of where salvation is. Cf. 1,31.41; 2,15; 3,10.34; 5,27-31.41; 6,5.56, etc. Hence the importance of his disciples being "with him." [3,14].
of Jesus' "would-be" disciples. Ultimately, they do obtain what they seek: "And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them" [10,16].

The poor rich man lacks the spontaneity of the children. Desiring, though with perhaps a little too much self-interest, "to inherit eternal life," he comes to Jesus. Nevertheless, he is a good man, as evidenced by the pattern of his conduct. Jesus loved him, and invited him to "come, follow me" [10,21]. To do so, however, meant removing the one thing lacking in the man: his attachment to things. He goes away sad, concerned about his possessions, probably not even noticing the loving look behind Jesus' call. How different the final image from that of the children to whom God's rule belongs in the previous passage! To be a disciple means that one's heart must be untrammeled by whatever renders it unfree to focus on the only one who matters.

Finally, discipleship calls for a spirit of humble service, the absence of self-seeking. Clearly, this is not something Jesus' "would-be" disciples have learned as they jockey for position on the road to Jerusalem. He corrects their pretensions to greatness by challenging them to be "last of all and servant of all," an attitude epitomized in readiness to reach out even to a small and unpretentious child [9,33-37]. Jesus disabuses them of their possessiveness and lack of tolerance by refusing to sanction a fellow exorcist [9,38-40]. But he most clearly exemplifies this spirit in handling the ambition of James and John [10,35-45]. To share his "glory" comes only to those who share his cross, the "cup" and "baptism" he is to undergo. Moreover, discipleship means being servant and slave of all. "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" [10,45].

Bartimaeus: Mark's First Authentic Disciple

Mark concludes this important teaching section by introducing a second blind man, the son of Timaeus. Where the first blind man symbolizes Jesus' would-be disciples and their groping process of coming to sight through contact with Christ, Bartimaeus sums up in him-
self all the qualities that Mark has been identifying with discipleship. True, Mark never directly calls this man a disciple. Nevertheless, he has him manifesting all that a disciple should be, characteristics that seem so elusive to those actually designated disciples in the gospel.

First of all, the blind beggar’s faith is both focused on who Jesus really is, and absolutely indomitable in its persevering trust. His cry combines all the elements of Jesus’ identity in Mark. It begins by addressing “Jesus,” the son of Mary, the carpenter from Nazareth, the man who came to be baptized by John in the Jordan, and then both amazed and antagonized by his words and deeds. Next, it recognizes this Jesus to be the Christ, the awaited “Son of David” who would restore all that Israel yearned for as God’s people.19 This is the first public and unrebuked recognition of Jesus as Messiah that occurs in Mark’s gospel. Finally, there may even be a hint that Jesus is more than Messiah. “Have mercy on me!” echoes continually from the Psalms in petition to the God of Mercies. Indeed, all that is missing here is the title “Lord.”20 And Bartimaeus’ referring to Jesus with the rarely used “Rabboni!” certainly bespeaks a depth of reverence for the person of Jesus that goes far beyond anything found in Mark.21

19 The title, though messianic, was not necessarily the most common designation of the “anointed one” at the time of Jesus. It is actually given more attention by Matthew than by Mark. Nevertheless, it remains part of the association with what people looked for in Jesus. “There is no proof that Jesus ever directly described himself as Messiah in the royal Davidic sense; nor is there any proof that categorically or clearly he rejected the title. . . . Despite Jesus’ reserve, his disciples even during his earthly life, seem to have thought of their master as in some sense the Davidic Messiah. . . . The resurrection could act as a catalyst and could be interpreted as the enthronement of the Son of David only if the disciples already harbored some idea of Jesus as Davidic Messiah. That Jesus’ actions and claims were interpreted in some royal messianic sense even by his adversaries during his lifetime seems confirmed by the charge on which he was brought before Pilate: being ‘King of the Jews’ . . . .” John P. Meier, “Jesus,” in NJBC, 1323ff. Cf. also his discussion in Marysia, II, 688ff., 736ff., nn.43,47.

20 Showing mercy or graciousness [eleos / elah] is a constant petition to God in the Psalms LXX [6,2; 9,3; 27,7; 30,10, etc.], as well as identified with God in the rest of the OT [e.g., Ex 33,19]. The verbs are not commonly used in the gospels. Matthew has seven uses, four of them linked with Lord [Kyrios]. The verb occurs only fifteen times outside the gospels, characteristically linking it with God [e.g., Rom 9,15.16.18; 11,30-32; 1 Cor 7,25; 2 Cor 4,1].

21 The only other time this word, a heightened form of rabbi/teacher, occurs in the
Nor is the blind man one to be held back, neither by the opposition of the crowds nor by his own concerns. Suppressed, he cries out more loudly. And when summoned, he throws off his cloak and springs up to go to Jesus. How much here the spirit of the children; how unlike the rich man, and the faltering confusion of Jesus’ own companions. The reference to Bartimaeus’ cloak may go deeper than simply indicating a physical action. It stands for a beggar’s livelihood, usually being spread out as the receptacle for whatever alms he might receive. That Bartimaeus leaves it behind as he draws near to Jesus is a fitting symbol of this blind man’s detachment from the things that sustain him. It is Jesus, not one’s material (or emotional, social, or any other) supports who must be the determining factor in a disciple’s life.

Finally, unlike so many of those who were touched by Jesus’ healing power, Bartimaeus does not simply go off to enjoy his new-found benefit. Mark, alone of the Synoptics, concludes the incident with a significant detail. The blind man regains his sight, and follows Jesus “on the way/road.” From the moment Jesus began to teach his disciples openly [8,31-32], that “way” has been heading for the cross. The imagery is very clear in 10,32, just prior to the third prediction of Christ’s death and resurrection: “They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them.” It is not surprising that Bartimaeus, who has already manifested so many of the key qualities of a true disciple, should join Jesus on the road to Jerusalem and the paschal events that await him there. For as Mark has already made clear [8,34-38], all authentic followers of Christ must be ready to deny themselves, take up their crosses, and lose their lives for his sake, and for the sake of the gospel.

Bible is John 20,16. It is uttered by Mary Magdalene as she recognizes the risen Lord.

22 Some copyists who realized the customs of beggars, but missed Mark’s symbolism, altered the text to “put on his cloak.” Cf. Nineham, Mark, 286. Also, Harrington, “Mark,” 619, who likewise suggests that “Bartimaeus was leaving behind the ‘old order.’”

23 It has been pointed out above, p.10, n.15, how Jesus as shepherd leads his disciples on the road to the cross and beyond.
The Poor Widow: A Second True Disciple

Though never called a disciple, Bartimaeus is the first individual in the gospel of Mark who seems to embody in the fullest sense what following Jesus is all about. He sums up in his faith, detachment, and identification with Jesus' fate in Jerusalem the key elements of discipleship contained in the teaching of 8,31—10,45. Indeed, disciples like Bartimaeus are hard to come by in Mark. Even so, the widow in 12,41-44 may well be a second candidate.

The blind man assumes added significance as disciple not just because of the way Mark describes him, but also because of the peculiar setting of the passage in which he appears. Bartimaeus, together with the first blind man in 8,22-26, is part of an inclusion which sets off the teaching of Jesus on discipleship. In a concise way, he sums up that teaching. The widow, too, should not be looked at in isolation. What she is and does is important; but where the passage dealing with her occurs, and what it relates to, is crucial for establishing her “discipleship” status.

Mark places the incident of the poor widow at the end of Jesus’ public ministry. In this section of his Gospel, Mark’s predilection for inclusion can be discerned in the reemergence of three patterns from the beginning of the Gospel. First, just at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus engages in series of clashes with Jewish leaders [2,1-3,6], so now, in his last days, Jesus is once again engaged in a series of debates with the same [11,27-12,34]. Secondly, just as the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry is marked by a summary of his teaching [1,14f], so too, as his ministry draws to a close, is a summary of his teaching provided [12,28-34]. Finally, just as Jesus began his ministry by calling disciples, so now his ministry ends with an example of one who sums up concisely what discipleship is all about.

Let us look more closely at the final summary of Jesus’ message in Mark. In the midst of Jesus’ final clash with his opponents, we are
presented with a scribe unlike the rest. Recognizing that Jesus has answered his opponents "well," the man poses to Jesus with apparent sincerity a question of legitimate concern for pious Jews of the day. "Which commandment is the first of all?" [12,28] Furthermore, the scribe remains open enough to affirm as "right" and "true" what Jesus tells him. It is this attitude of sincere seeking and openness, quite unlike the close-minded resistance that tries to force new wine into old wineskins [2,22], which wins the man the rather remarkable comment from Jesus: "You are not far from the reign of God" [12,34].

This reference to the reign of God, and the context in which it is used, also gives a special significance to the passage. It is the last time the term will be used before the Passion. It is spoken in reference to the scribe's attitude of openness and seeking; it also includes what that seeking is open to: the first commandment calls for a total personal commitment in love to "the Lord our God," a love that reaches out also to include people.

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24 In parallel versions of this account, both Matthew and Luke have Jesus' opponents putting him to the test. Matthew employs Pharisees, who put forth a legal expert [22,34£], while Luke simply uses a nomikos or legal expert. Mark, in contrast to previous debates between Jesus and his opponents, drops any hint of antagonism.

25 What characterizes religious leaders' opposition to Jesus in Mark is a judgmental refusal to admit new possibilities in the way God can be encountered. Jesus sums it up as favoring human tradition over God's commandment [7,8,13]. Mark concretizes this hardness of heart in five confrontations at the beginning of Jesus' ministry [2,1—3,6], which culminate in efforts to destroy him. These clashes are concentrically arranged, the central incident concluding with the image "new wine for fresh wineskins." Stock, Mark, p.90, calls this "the expression of the Christian identity with its forms of new life." He continues: "This part (2,1—3,6) constitutes a kind of small gospel within the large narrative. Here we find the victorious aspect of the burgeoning newness which Jesus made present by pardoning and healing, but also the tragic perspective toward which he is unswervingly directed . . . ."

26 Jesus' answer combines two OT quotations (Deut 6,4-5 and Lev 19,18), thus underlining his orthodoxy as a Jewish teacher and illustrating his fondness for going to the root of things. The passage is important not so much for its originality as for its emphasis on inner and basic dispositions." Harrington, "Mark," 622. It also assumes added significance in light of the entire ministry of Jesus that precedes it and of which it is a summary.
Is it not possible to see in this passage Mark’s summing up of what has been the substance of Jesus’ “good news,” a necessary filling out of what is contained in that first summary at the start of the gospel [1,14f]? There, the first use of “reign of God” occurs. Jesus’ ministry is depicted as being centered on this reality, which is near. His ministry is above all a call for people to transform their way of looking at things, to believe in the “good news” that he proclaims. Here in Mark 12, with Jesus’ last public mention of “reign of God,” we realize that his ministry has been nothing less than a call for people to open their hearts, to seek fully and absolutely to commit themselves to God and neighbor. This is what the transformation of minds and hearts, the belief in the gospel that 1,15 so cryptically presents, is all about. It is what has been embodied in the words and deeds of Mark’s Jesus throughout the entire course of his ministry.

Which brings us back to the widow and discipleship. The first summary of Jesus’ gospel leads into the call of his first disciples, men who exemplify the essential response to what that gospel involves. It is not surprising, then, that the final summary of the gospel leads into another response, this time by a woman, who embodies the essential elements of the first commandment.

The poor widow is presented almost cursorily, but not without substance. She stands in marked contrast to the scribes, whose attitudes and practices Jesus denounces [12,38-40]. Her selfless, God-centered anonymity is as unlike their self-seeking pretense as their spirit is foreign to that of the first commandment. Instead, she might rather be compared to Bartimaeus. Like Bartimaeus, she is never called a disciple. But also like him, she brings together several important qualities of discipleship, those identified with the first commandment as well as those possessed by an individual who stands for all an authentic Markan disciple should be.

First to be noticed is the atmosphere of faith that pervades the incident. The widow comes to God’s Temple; her contribution is one that stems from a deep sense of piety as she makes her offering. As a
“poor widow,” she doubly qualifies as one of the classic anawim, the helpless ones whose only hope is in God. She typifies that endless stream of little people down through the ages whose simple, child-like faith so often accompanies a generosity that has long kept collection plates and poor boxes from running empty. No “long prayers” and front-row “synagogue seats” simply for show here [12,39f.]; it is rather the quiet, inner conviction of a heart turned to God and the things of God that is operative. She obviously ranks with “one of these little ones who believe in me” [9,42].

Secondly, the widow holds nothing back. Her inner freedom and detachment can simply be taken for granted as Mark shows her readiness to cast off those few coins which stand for so much. When a person loves with whole heart, soul, mind and strength, there is little thought of clinging to personal possessions. Her gift blends nicely themes like Bartimaeus’ cloak and the first commandment. Like the children, the widow is focused beyond herself on the Lord; unlike the rich man, she is able to give up what she has — perhaps because she recognizes that God looks on her with love [10,21], and that is all that really matters.

Finally, the passage emphasizes the cost of her offering: “everything she had, all she had to live on” [12,44]. This willingness to set aside what seems important for living one’s life in favor of what is more important echoes essential themes in Markan discipleship. Jesus’ first four followers leave livelihood and family to attach themselves to him [1,18.20]. When Jesus teaches that discipleship demands taking up the cross and following him, he specifically mentions the concomitant

27 The Bible saw the poor not just from an economic and social perspective, but also with a view to inner disposition. Defended by the prophets, the poor and their cry echo from the psalms, where not just the needy but the persecuted and afflicted are included. The poor of the psalms appear as friends and servants of Yahweh, whom they fear and seek and confidently look to for shelter. Defenseless, they are the humble ones who in faith and fidelity commit their affairs to God, unlike the proud and violent, their negative counterparts. Cf. Dictionary of Biblical Theology, Second Edition, s.v. “Poor.” Also, Gerhard Von Rad, Old Testamentology, I [Harper & Row, 1962], 400f.
demand to "lose one's life" [8,35f.]. It is the inability to turn his back on his livelihood, his "possessions," that blocks the rich man from becoming a disciple [10,21f.]. It is one distinguishing mark of Bartimaeus' discipleship that he is ready to follow Jesus on the road to the cross [10,52].

The widow's offering of "everything she had" clearly puts her in the company of Jesus. In fact, some see in her an image of Jesus as he goes to his death.

In her poverty, the widow has placed all in God's hands. Jesus, in the utter poverty of his failure, having lived in his own life the acceptance of God's reign that he preached, is about to make that surrender to God complete. . . . That widow, in accepting completely the risk of depending on God, is a paradigm of Jesus himself. One more outsider, she mirrors the very heart of God.28

Conclusion

This paper has considered Mark's main question for all who listen to his gospel: "Who do you say that I am?" It is the question that emerges from beneath the accumulation of scenes that depict the words and deeds of Jesus. It is the question which, responded to in faith, ultimately implies a follow-up question: "What are you going to do about it?" From this perspective, Mark's gospel is nothing less than an invitation to discipleship.

Mark's teaching on discipleship occurs at key points in the gospel. He presents two concise, and complementary, summaries at the beginning and at the conclusion of Jesus' public ministry [1,14f.; 12,28-34]. In the context of Jesus' proclaiming the Reign of God, disciples are those who are ready to follow him, transforming their former way of thinking and living, believing in the good news he inaugurates. In the

28 Flanagan, Mark, 128.
context of identifying that response with the love of the first, and second, commandment, disciples are those who commit their whole heart, soul, mind, and strength to the Lord our God and other human beings. In a more extensive teaching section which follows the confession at Caesarea Philippi, Mark elaborates on the qualities of disciples: they are people willing to identify themselves with Jesus’ cross and resurrection because they possess faith, a focused and detached spirit, a readiness to give themselves in a service that is humble and devoid of self-seeking.

In the course of his gospel Mark presents a number of examples of those who manifest certain aspects of discipleship. Jesus’ immediate followers, the Twelve, do leave everything to follow him [10,28]. Individuals like the woman who touches him in the crowd [5,25-34], the truth-seeking scribe [12,28-34], the centurion at the cross [15,39] embody elements of deeper faith, or openness to faith, that are essential for discipleship. Mark’s references to children show them to be images of unpretentious and untrammelled readiness to draw near to Christ.

But none of these examples draws together the composite of discipleship qualities that are to be found in Bartimaeus and the widow. These two are never explicitly called ‘disciples.’ But each is placed in a context of discipleship teaching, and each in a variety of ways sums up that teaching. Moreover, both resemble each other in their common embodiments of faith, detachment, and willingness to give themselves in service. It is for these reasons that they have been singled out in this paper.

What about the “would-be” disciples, those designated as Jesus’ chosen followers who do leave all to be with him but who consistently fail to live up to what discipleship involves? True, Mark seems to be somewhat hard on them. And yet it must be remembered that it is only because these men eventually do arrive at an understanding and acceptance of the full demands of discipleship that a gospel like Mark’s could even be written. They are in a process of growing into disciple-
ship. The image of the first blind man [8,22-26] anticipates that sight will come, even though the process may take time and repeated effort by Jesus. He never gives up on them. Indeed, at a moment when two of his closest followers seem most uncomprehending [10,35-37], Jesus mentions that they will drink one day the cup he will drink "and be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized" [10,39]. Ultimately, in what is probably the final scene of Mark's gospel, it is to "his disciples and Peter" [16,7] that the resurrection kerygma is entrusted. The "would-be" disciples do become what they are called to be.

Mark's gospel will always provide a needed spur for those who, like the Twelve, serve as publicly designated "disciples" in the Christian community. They are sent with authority to do what Jesus did: to proclaim the reign of God, to drive out the power of evil [3,14]. Mark reminds them, however, that this responsibility demands a commitment to grow into what discipleship really is all about. Clearly, discipleship does not come simply from being designated such. It involves essential characteristics that identify the follower with Jesus. If these are missing, "disciples" can easily begin to use position or ministry in ways that are simply self-seeking, human ways of thinking and doing things rather than God's.

And Mark, by choosing two "unlikely" disciples to embody the qualities of authentic discipleship, also warns official disciples away from a false sense of elitism. It is not simply those designated "disciples" who exemplify what commitment to the reign of God involves. James and John betray a hyper-protective attitude that can frequently creep into official circles [9,38]. Overused, it can serve merely to keep little ones away from the Lord [10,13f.], or suppress their calling out in

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29Most scholars see 16,9-20 as an appended ending, which Catholics consider to be part of the canonical gospel. Granted, to end with the women leaving in fear hardly seems the best of conclusions. Three different endings were added in antiquity to compensate for the abruptness, but none seem to be from Mark. In any case, the Christian kerygma is quite complete with 16,1-8, and Matthew's gospel adds little more than Mark by way of resurrection appearances. Nineham, Mark, 439-42 has an excellent summary of the problem. Cf. also Brown, Introduction, 148f., and Harrington, "Mark," 629.

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faith [10,48]. Instead, Mark seems to be saying, albeit indirectly, that the little ones need to be welcomed and learned from. They so often teach a great deal about what the following of Jesus the Christ is all about.

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30 In this he seems to fortify a point made by the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines [PCP II]: the need to "think twice about the depth of faith of those we call 'nominal Catholics'" who so often manifest the values of the Kingdom in their acts of kindness and mercy to one another as simple human beings. Cf. "Our World — The Philippines: Lights and Shadows," No. 14, in Secretariat, Acts and Decrees of the Secondary Plenary Council of the Philippines (Manila: Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, 1992). Further on, in "Envisioning a Church Renewed," #132, ibid., PCP II centers in on what is involved in a "Church of the Poor": "... that the Church will not only evangelize the poor, but that the poor in the Church will themselves become evangelizers. Pastors and leaders will learn to be with, work with, and learn from the poor. A 'Church of the Poor' will not only render preferential service to the poor but will practice preferential reliance on the poor in the work of evangelization." Cf. also ibid., Nos. 98, 136, 296.